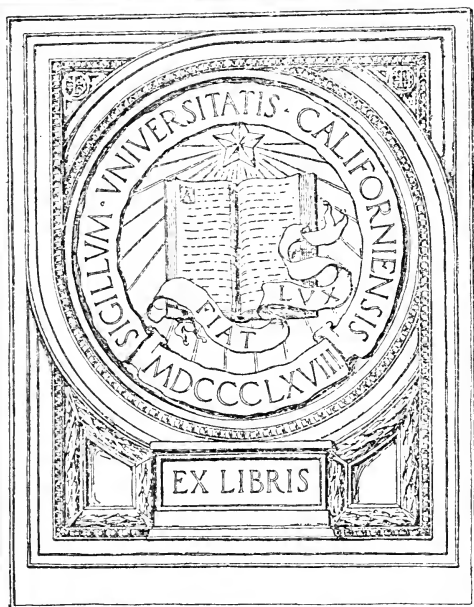


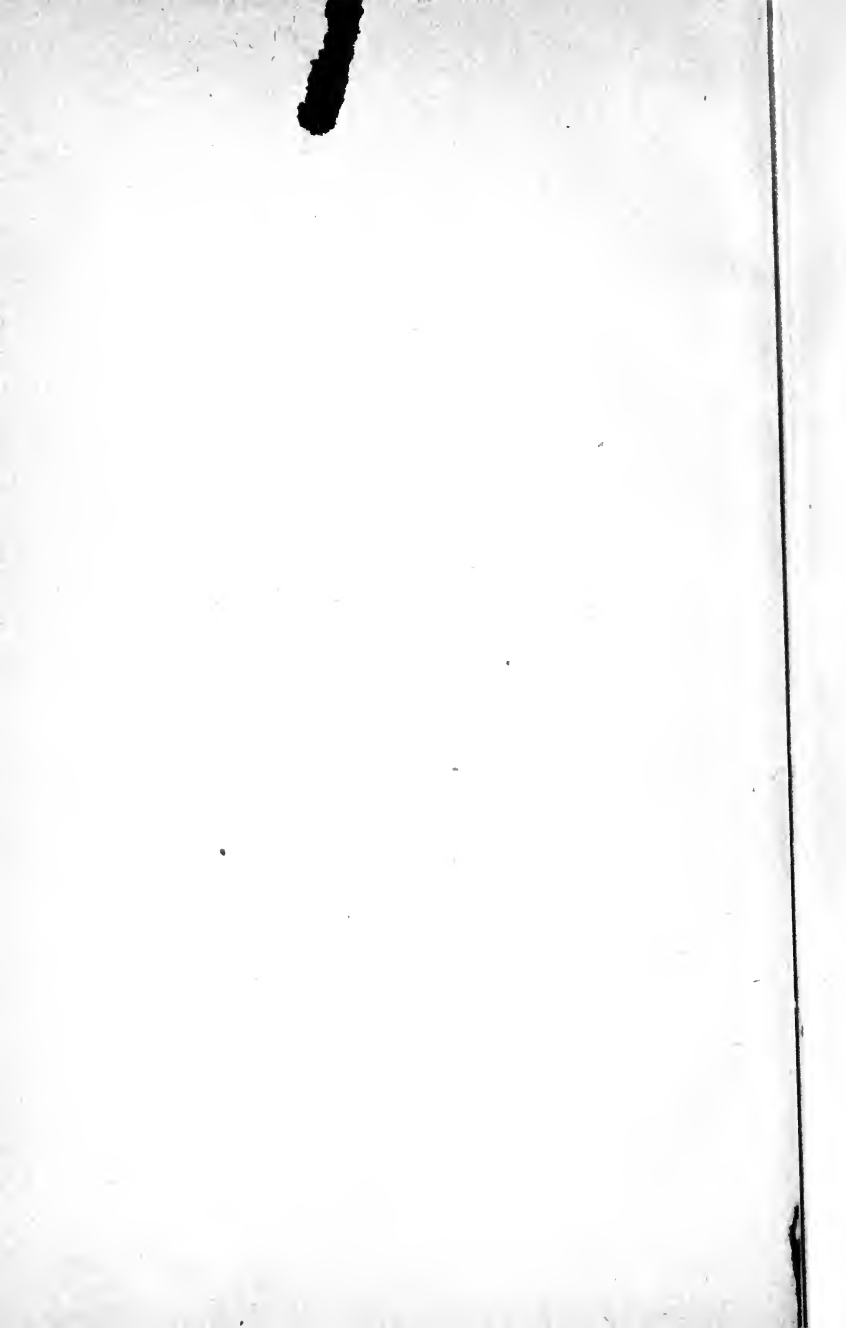
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THE LORD
OF THE
DARK RED STAR.

**DRAMATIC SONNETS, POEMS,
AND BALLADS**

(BY THE SAME AUTHOR).

FORMING A NEW VOLUME IN
"THE CANTERBURY POETS" SERIES

THE LORD OF THE DARK RED STAR:

BEING THE STORY OF THE SUPER-
NATURAL INFLUENCES IN THE LIFE
OF AN ITALIAN DESPOT OF THE
THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

BY

EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

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TO THE
AUTHOR

Contents.



I.—FRA LUCA.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE SACRILEGE	3
II. IN A STRONG HOUSE	6
III. THE CALL OF GOD	21
IV. THE LION'S DEN	30

II.—GISLA.

V. DARK PLOTTING	49
VI. LIONELLO	56
VII. GISLA'S SOUL	64
VIII. EBLIS	76
IX. DREADFUL BOUNDARIES	85
X. THE KING OF THE MAD	90
XI. TORCHLIGHT AND LIGHT	99

III.—SELVAGGIA.

XII. THE MISTRESS OF THE LEOPARDS	107
XIII. THE AMULET	116
XIV. BY THE SICILIAN SEA	122
XV. CROWNS AND SCEPTRES	129
XVI. IN THE MOONLIT GARDEN	136

Contents

IV.—ADALHITA.

CHAP.	PAGE
XVII. TRAMP OF HORSE . . .	145
XVIII. THE CAPTAIN OF THE SARACENS .	153
XIX. IBRAHIM'S NIGHT RIDE . . .	158
XX. MAGIC MAIL . . .	164
XXI. THE CALL OF EBLIS . . .	168
XXII. DESCENT TO GEHENNA . . .	176

V.—THE CHILD.

XXIII. THE CASTLE OF LOVE . . .	191
XXIV. THE WORKING OF THE PACT . . .	200
XXV. A MEETING OF GHOSTS . . .	211
XXVI. HOLY WATER . . .	216
XXVII. THE EMPTY CRADLE . . .	225
XXVIII. UNDER THE WITCHES' MOON . .	231

VI.—IBRAHIM.

XXIX. WANING POWER . . .	239
XXX. THE LEOPARDESS AT BAY . . .	245
XXXI. THE MIRACLE . . .	252
XXXII. A COUNCIL OF CAPTAINS . . .	262
XXXIII. THE STRENGTH OF THE AMULET .	271
XXXIV. SLEEP BEFORE BATTLE . . .	282
XXXV. CASSANO . . .	288
XXXVI. THE LAST THROW . . .	291

*“ Son and Mother, Death and Sin,
Played at dice for Ezelin,
Till Death cried ‘I win! I win!’ ”*

—SHELLEY.



I.

Fra Luca.



The Lord of the Dark Red Star.

CHAPTER I.

THE SACRILEGE.

THE sun was setting like a disc of glowing metal on the March of Treviso.

The fanatic who was known in those parts as the Hermit of the Stony Holes, stood looking across the world of rock and scrub which stretched far and wide round his lair. A confused sound, like the baying of hounds, had reached him in the narrow cave, scarcely larger than the hole of a badger, which protected him from the sun and the rain; and he now stood, tall and gaunt, like the rude crucifix

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

which he had carved to guard his cell, and shaded his sunken eyes from the glare.

"He is man-hunting again," he muttered, as the sound of the baying rose and fell in the distance. "How long, O Lord, how long?"

Suddenly there broke through the bushes a man with the sweat of agony on white, shining features—a man hunted like a boar or a wolf—who stumbled and fell at his feet.

"Sanctuary! Sanctuary! For the love of Christ, sanctuary!" he gasped, trying to stagger up, and clasping the anchorite's garment with his hand, on which a broken manacle still hung.

A minute or two later, the yells, which were growing louder and louder, burst like a storm round the spot. But the hermit was alone.

In an instant he was surrounded by the ravenous pack, and seemed about to be torn in pieces, when all at once, obeying a power later chronicled as miracle, the hounds fell back and fawned at his feet.

The Sacrilege

A small beardless man dashed up on a black horse. He fixed two eyes of extraordinary keenness in a long, suspicious look on the hermit.

"He must have passed here or nowhere," he said. "You have seen him."

"I have seen but the mercy of God," answered the other. "That is all that has passed."

"The mercy of God? That is game I have hunted before," said the rider, "and game I shall hunt down yet."

He wheeled his horse round, hurled his short boar-spear straight at the cross, and left it quivering in the body of the Christ.

CHAPTER II.

IN A STRONG HOUSE.

MEANWHILE the baying of hounds—even of man-hunting hounds—was not the only sound whose echoes startled the lean and scanty peasantry between the Alps and the Po. War—war dreadful and endemic—raged ceaselessly, hopelessly, as, one by one, the Emperor's great Vicar made himself master of the cities. Ezelin, Ezelin, everywhere Ezelin, the Successful, the Terrible. In Padua, in Verona, in Belluno, in Vicenza, in Bassano, in Treviso—everywhere his shadow fell on men's lives. Everywhere his dark Moslem soldiery, from his master's Sicilian recruiting-ground, preyed on the starving land. Everywhere the light-haired Swabians, pouring down through the passes of the Alps to serve under his standard,

In a Strong House

filled their saddle-bags with the plunder of Italy, and called for more of their brothers to come and fill up their ranks. For the Second Frederick had come down into Lombardy to assert his imperial but ever-contested authority, and he had found one man who, of all others, was born to be his ally and his instrument. Of all the Ghibelline despots, Ezelin, partly by inheritance, partly by pitiless genius, had acquired a power in the March of Treviso that none could surpass or approach. When the cities of Italy had painfully developed a stormy independence, they had done so only by admitting within their walls the ambitious and turbulent nobles whose castles surrounded them, and whose main object was now to subdue them and rule them under one title or another. So the Ezelins of Romano, a castle near Padua, had become citizen-despots of that and of the neighbouring cities. To employ the levies of one city to subjugate another had become an art and a science ;

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

and none had pushed that art and that science to so high a degree of perfection as Ezelin, the fourth of his name. Frederick knew it, and named him his Imperial Vicar, lending him his Swabian and Saracen mercenaries, and confirming his illegitimate authority by imperial letters-patent.

In Ezelin's house in Verona there was a babel of tongues—German and Arabic, Sicilian and Lombard, Provençal and Greek—all the languages spoken in Frederick's heterogeneous dominions. In its courts and its lobbies lounged mercenaries, who wore the garb of every country that called the great Emperor master.

It was a sombre and frowning collection of buildings, half palace, half fortalice, constructed about a huge square tower that formed part of the city walls, where it had a gate with a heavy portcullis. But inside, the severity of its appearance was redeemed by much varied ornamentation. The principal

In a Strong House

court was surrounded by columns with flowered stone capitals. The windows of the banqueting-hall were divided by light sculptured pillars into beautiful, pointed arches, and some of the smaller courts were filled with shrubs and with flowers, with pomegranates and oleanders, which contrasted with the blackened and excoriated stone. Like all the palace-fortresses of the time, which might at any moment have to stand a siege, either at the hands of the city mob or at those of some loathed brother noble, some hereditary enemy, it contained in its vaulted halls and tower chambers all the requisites for protracted resistance as well as for external war. In the wide yard that lay in the shadow of the great tower, and where lounged the motley men-at-arms, the grooms, and the varlets, were heaped the pyramids of stones for the slingers and the larger stone balls for the catapults. In the galleries of its armoury stood the great stacks of pikes

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

and the long, knightly lances. On the walls, between flaunting banners, hung the many-quartered shields and the dark coats of chain, the tabards of the heralds and the leathern jerkins of the bowmen. On shelves between the arches stood the long rows of hauberks and of shining steel caps. There, too, in the saddlery, were the wonderful trappings of the war-steeds, the high-peaked saddles for battle and joust, and the embroidered tapestries that were hung from the windows in the rare pageants of peace. So much for what was above ground. Below, in the deep foundations of the building, round the roots of the towers, were the dungeons, the windowless chambers, the sound-proof torture-rooms, the places for dark executions, the cellars for nameless interment.

A new troop of Swabians had lately arrived from South Germany down the valley of the Adige, eager to emulate the rapacity of their countrymen, and still wondering at their

In a Strong House

novel surroundings. Their captain was walking up and down one of the broad, columned courts with a captain of the Lombards. Each was still young, and a type of his race.

"Well, friend Hermann," the slight and olive-faced Lionello was saying, "and what do you think of this Italy of ours, and of the way that we wage our wars?"

He spoke in German, for he had served to the north of the Alps, and he knew the tongue well.

"Two questions in one breath," answered the Swabian; and he smiled under his blond moustache. "Your stone cities, with their great towers and belfries, their palaces and their arches, are very stately—far statelier than our gabled wooden towns. My Teuton bands would find it pleasant enough to slacken their limbs in them for a while—even as the German Adige slackens its flood and rests when it makes itself Italian. But I see little chance of it at present. Ezelin keeps his

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

troops too well employed. . . . And that brings me to your second question—the way you wage your wars.”

“You think his methods strange?” asked Lionello.

“It is only two months,” Hermann answered, “that we have eaten your Lombard bread and drunk your Lombard wine; but I confess that in these two months we have seen some sights that would make old war-hounds shrink,—shrink like beardless boys in their first fight. And yet we had seen many a castle stormed and many a town sacked and put to the sword. We know war’s wild doings as well as any. But what we have seen here beats all. The blinding of those men; the drowning of those children——”

“Ay, the ways of Ezelin are dire,” said Lionello gravely. “You would scarcely guess it, would you, when you see him riding by for the first time, silent and inscrutable? There are many of those who ride behind

In a Strong House

him, who look darker of brow and fiercer of eye than he."

"It is a face that looks neither good nor bad," answered the other—"a mask and nothing more, which defies your scrutiny. At a little distance, you might almost take it for a boy's. It is only close by that you see the traces of age. When I first set eyes on him, I thought: Can *that* be the man whose very shadow spreads fear through the lands—who, in the storm of these evil times, has made himself the lord of city after city?"

"There is no more pitiless captain in the world," said the Lombard.

"Ay, it would be hard to match what we saw after he had stormed Berella," assented Hermann. "It is true that the castle had held out long, and that the flights of arrows had done havoc. Does he treat every castle as he treated that?"

"It is his fashion," said Lionello.

"Does he never show mercy?"

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"No. He said good-bye to pity after the first rebellions he had to crush. But they say that at first it was not so bad. On his first great day of triumph, when he took Padua, he rode into the city with his helmet thrown back on his shoulders in sign of clemency. But now he is inexorable; and ever since I have known him, rope and rack follow him everywhere."

The Lombard paused, as if hesitating to continue his thought. Then, apparently making up his mind to speak,

"There is one," he said, "who now and then can save a life behind his back, and then not without great peril."

"And who is that?" asked the Swabian.

"His wife, the silent Gisla. She is known to haunt his dungeons in secret, where knife and screw never rest, and where the torture-fires are never allowed to go out, and to make them a little less hell-like. Have you seen her yet?"

In a Strong House

"Yes; I have seen her sitting in silence at his side, and I have noted her pale sad face. Her hair is strangely white for one still young. She must be scarcely over thirty, and the light of youth is in her eyes——"

"Ah, her white hair," answered Lionello, with a laugh that sounded bitter. "That was *his* work, a trick he played—and he is fond of tricks. One day, after he had stormed a castle, she pleaded for the lives of its lord and his four sons. Ezelin told her that she might have their lives if she would run bare-breasted through a narrow gangway between two walls of blazing wood. If not, they should die. And she did it. But when she reached the other end of the fiery lane, it was only to find the five whose lives she sought to save hanging from a gallows. It was that that made her hair turn white."

Lionello paused.

"Oh, there are angels," he said, speaking rather to himself than to the other, "whom

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

God allows to live for a little while on earth without the wings of heaven, and whom we call mere women. And of such is she. I might quote other deeds of hers as fair," he continued, raising his voice a little. "I know a man whose wound from a poisoned arrow she once sucked, and whose life she saved. Look: this is the scar;" and he bared his arm to the elbow.

"What, the wound was yours?" exclaimed Hermann. "That was in truth a fair deed, and a noble way to win you to her service. I'll be bound you would lay down your life for her willingly, if she claimed it."

"When that hour shall strike, she shall not call on me twice," the other answered slowly. "But, look: there she goes, lost in thought. She doesn't see us."

And, indeed, on the other side of the court, behind the sculptured columns, a woman's figure was passing, clad in white. A ray of sun fell straight upon her, and formed,

In a Strong House

by a freak of light, something like a nimbus round her head.

"Strange, that white hair on so young a brow," said the Swabian, half under his breath. "By my soul! but she does look like a saint. Hers must be a strange fate too—for one so bent on good to be so linked to evil."

"There stands no nobler woman in God's sight. All is blood and terror round her."

They resumed their walk up and down, but had not done so long when they were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a figure young and martial as themselves, but dusky of skin and clad in a garb very different from their sober Western raiment. It was one of the captains of Ezelin's Saracen horse. The scowl on his brow was so marked that the other two could scarcely avoid taking notice of it at once.

"What, is it thou?" said Lionello, addressing him in Lombard, and moving a step

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

forward to meet him. "What has ruffled thee, Ibrahim?"

"You would know what has ruffled me? It were wiser not to ask," the other answered in the same language, striding up to them, while his scowl grew more threatening.

"What is his wrath about?" asked the Swabian, who understood the manner, if not the words; "who has wronged him?"

"He had better not ask, if he cares for his safety," replied the Saracen. "Is it for him who profits by injustice to play the dullard and pretend not to know? Are his brains so dim beneath his towy locks that I must explain? Does he expect me to look on unmoved while Ezelin compels us to give up what we have taken, every time we quell a rising or storm a castle, and hands it over to those who watch us, well out of arrow-shot?"

And he laid his hand on the jewelled hilt of his Damascene dagger.

In a Strong House

“Does he call the moat still choked with dead, and where we won such glory, out of arrow-shot?” blazed out Hermann, when Lionello had translated the grievance. “The arrows fell like pelting rain on every mother’s son; and round those battlements my men fought well—yea, better than his!”

“A lie! A lie!” thundered the Moslem. And drawing his long glistening weapon, he sprang blind with fury on the Swabian, whose dagger was out not less quickly.

Lionello rushed between them—to his own great risk; but the violence of their onslaught was such that he was flung aside at once; and they would certainly have left at least one corpse on the ground, if the sudden entrance of a new-comer had not stopped them with almost magical abruptness. A small pale man was standing beside them.

“What, daggers out?” he said, and the words hissed through his teeth. “My dogs

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

are fighting? Ah, I see that of late I have plied the whip too seldom."

The Saracen was the first to answer.

"It was about the booty you've divided," he said sullenly.

"Silence, hound," said the new-comer, approaching a step nearer, "and wait till thou art called. Ah, thou hadst forgotten who is master of the kennel? I must send for sharper lashes. And now approach, both of you, and lay your daggers at my feet—here, on the ground. Nay, snarl not as thou cringest, nor show thy teeth so plainly, Ibrahim ben Yousouf. And now it's Hermann's turn. Ah, now my dogs obey. It was time."

And when the daggers had been laid at his feet, he dismissed them all three, and remained a little while, smiling a strange dark smile.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALL OF GOD.

IT was an age in which good and ill condensed themselves, so to speak, into human lives that were far stronger and more active on the one side or the other than we, who are accustomed to see the soul of good in things evil, can readily realise. The saint and the caitiff, the ecstatic and the recreant, stared each other in the face, and tried in vain to guess each other's meaning. The thousand middle tints of human character, such as we know them to-day, seemed entirely wanting. Each land, each city, each hamlet, had its devotee of good and its devotee of ill, its martyr and its torturer. In the March of Treviso—perhaps we might say in the whole of East Lombardy—two men, two

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

moral forces, were gravitating in hostility to each other, Ezelin the despot and Fra Luca the ecstatic, whom the common people knew as the Hermit of the Stony Holes. They were the two incompatible forces.

St. Francis and St. Antony had been dead for a generation; but the breed of them was there. Their mantles had fallen on shoulders not less worthy. Everywhere throughout Northern and Central Italy, the friar and the visionary were busy delivering their message of peace and of mercy. They were ever at hand, ready to mediate between rival cities, between hereditary enemies, between irreconcilable factions; ready to stretch the crucifix between the axe of the tyrant and the neck of the victim. Throughout the whole of that thirteenth century, a hundred half-forgotten prototypes anticipated Savonarola, without his weakness and without his glory. Once, at the call of a simple friar, the people of Verona, of Mantua, of Brescia, of Padua, of

The Call of God

Treviso, of Feltre, nay, even of Venice and Bologna, met barefooted on the banks of the Adige, with their battle-wains and the standards of their respective cities, to sing the hymn of Christ and of peace. Men like Fra Giacomo of Pavia, Fra Giordano of Padua, and Fra Giovanni of Schio, threw themselves between human hatreds and summoned the great and the merciless to remember that Christ had once died upon the cross. In the words of the Pope who sent one of them forth, God bade them "give voice to the wail of innumerable prisons, to the moan of those who were languishing in chains; to give voice to the cry of hunger and of thirst, and to the cry of the blood that was flowing in ceaseless war."

Fra Luca at that moment was the force that made for good between the Po and the Eastern Alps. Now preaching in the cities, and now sharing the life of the wild animals that dwelt in desert places, he was ever

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

appealing to God with prayer, and call, and prophecy; ministering to the weak and the wretched, or gazing in vision into the open gates of a heaven whose light, seen by snatches, alone made earth for a moment endurable. Of his earlier years we know nothing, nor perhaps did his contemporaries; but there were rumours that the sackcloth which he wore had not always covered his nakedness; that he had once been of the great of the world, nay, that he had himself been of the proud and the dreaded, and had given up all in an hour of sudden conversion. Be this as it may, it admits of no doubt that he believed in the possibility of such sudden conversions in others.

And so it came about that he conceived what most men would have told him was the most useless, and what his own sense certainly told him was the most perilous of enterprises,—the conversion of Ezelin.

The thought worked in his soul, and he waited for his chance.

The Call of God

Fra Luca had been for some time in the confidence of Ezelin's wife. Theirs were two souls that were bound to seek each other out in the darkness, to grope nearer and nearer for each other. Each for some time had helped the other in their missions of mercy, when at last the great opportunity came. But, to his surprise, Gisla gave him no encouragement in his perilous scheme; nay, she at once implored him to abandon it.

"I tell you again," she said, "that you do not know Ezelin, nor how he toys with life, and death, and torture. In vain you will cast away your life, and only throw new guilt on his soul. The brow of Cain was white compared with his. Oh yes, I know that God works miracles; that Heaven can make the black soul white, and cleanse the sinner's brow of darkest guilt—but Ezelin!"

But the ecstatic only shook his head.

"I take God's bidding as I hear it," he answered.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"What you would do means not merely death, but torture," Gisla pleaded.

"Well, what if it does? For my soul's sake I'll bear it. Do we not all know that the torture-room is as the crucible in which the soul is cleansed of all the dross which adheres to it here below?"

"No doubt," Gisla assented. "No doubt it is such a crucible. But yet, oh pause. The sight of your cowl will madden him with rage. Your limbs will be his to play with as he pleases. Do you really dream that you can convert him? I tell you that there are ironies in Ezelin which make the angels shrink. Have you heard, as I have, his low cold chuckle blend with shrieks of agony? You are on the brink of death: I bid you pause."

But Fra Luca only repeated, "God bids me summon him."

"If words could bend his soul to God, do you think I should not try the appeal

The Call of God

myself, and call upon God to lend words to a woman? What is it to me to die? What is my life worth? God knows I have but too often sought to barter it for the life of some wretch that I knew to be innocent, and I have only brought more torture upon him."

She paused; but her words made little impression upon the fanatic.

"There is nothing," she continued, "so strange as Ezelin. He plays with pain just as others play with sound. The human frame is his lute, and he loves to pass his hands on the strings. He will often affect a momentary pity; but it is only a game of cat and mouse made human. Did I say human? Oh, there is something in him that is not in other men. His freaks obey laws that are not of earth; and there are subtler evil thoughts in his soul than those that sway even his mother Adalhita; and we know what dark powers control her life. Think of all the good that

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

you might do, and waste not everything in seeking a useless death."

"I have heard God's call," repeated Fra Luca.

"And have not I?" Gisla said, while a look of intense pain came over her pale face. "A call, though perhaps one less loud, has struck my own soul too. I have heard it fall at night upon the silence, and I have bowed my soul in awe. And what it said to me was this: 'Gisla, I need thy life, thy life which I bestowed, and not thy death. I need thy life amid human evil, by the dread one's side. Thou wilt have to look on while ten are being racked, that thou mayst perhaps save one. Thou wilt have to repress the cry of writhing nature, and hide thy helpless anguish while the guiltless die, risking thy life each day without the martyr's rapture, and envying the victims their death. Thou shalt allay their body's torture, racked thyself in soul.' That is what God's voice has said

The Call of God

to *me*. God summons you and me on different paths. If you have truly heard God's call rolling like thunder through your soul, rise up and go, and do what He bids you. You will cast your life away; and in doing so, you will stain Ezelin's soul with one more crime. But good may come of it—for men here upon earth, and for yourself in heaven."

CHAPTER IV.

THE LION'S DEN.

AND so one day she placed him, not without peril to herself, in a lobby which Ezelin would pass through, and left him there to meet his fate.

Fra Luca had the courage of the martyr; but as he walked up and down waiting for the tyrant, his soul was strained by the slowly passing minutes even to breaking-point. The silence of that empty lobby was harder to bear than direst pain.

"O God," he murmured, "O ever-helpful Power, who in great moments givest men strength, sustain Thy servant now! I stand here like Daniel in the dreadful den, where each slightest lighting of the drowsy eye may mean immediate death. And now, as then,

The Lion's Den

the silence cows the soul. But Thou on high, Lord God of lions, help Thy servant! Never yet has earth seen deeds like his; never yet has the vault of heaven been defied by such crimes. O God, when wilt Thou set Thy limit? How long, O Lord, how long? How can the woods be green, the song of thrush and linnet fill them, and the sun shine down as ever? Oh, the need for Heaven's help is great. And I, the feeble one, have come to beard him in his den, and call him to Thy feet."

A slight rustle behind him made him turn. Ezelin, who had entered unperceived, was silently observing him.

"And so," said the Emperor's Vicar, with a grim smile, "you have done what few would dare: you have sought Ezelin in his own hall, and you stand there alive, and do not quail?"

"God," answered the anchorite, "gives us the strength we ask for. But though He

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

gives the will to do the duty, He does not conceal the peril."

"Duty?" asked Ezelin, slightly raising his eyebrows.

"Ay, duty; and I shall strive to do mine without flinching. I bring you this writ, which I have been chosen at my own request to serve upon you."

"Ah, I expected it," said Ezelin; "the excommunication. I scarcely supposed that any man would have the curious thought of serving it on me in person. Are you blessed with a taste for torture?"

"I have for some time been seeking a chance to speak to you face to face, and so I craved this mission. Oh, I know it is fraught with infinite peril; and I know but too well that in my wish to save your living soul, I am staking my life on a single throw."

Ezelin's eyes rested on his visitor with something like curiosity.

"You are right," he said. "It is not your

The Lion's Den

monkish cowl that will prevent my sending you at once to the tormentors. For the faint control the Church still had is ended now, and by this very writ. You have doubtless heard that I am quaint in tortures?"

"What answer would you have me make?" replied Fra Luca. "I know that nothing can save me but a miracle of God."

"And you expect one?"

"What can I say? God has converted many a man who seemed a fiend incarnate, and who had trodden on everything that is holy. And you, perchance, are fated to be weaned from hell through me. Oh, think not that I boast. He may not choose to save me. I have leaned on no such hope. And now I crave at most that you should give me a hearing."

"You are brave," said Ezelin; "I would I had a dozen as brave in my army."

"If I have sought you as I have, here in your lair, at risk of screw and fire, it is because,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

to save a soul like yours requires means as terrible as you are terrible yourself."

"You flatter me."

"If you were not so great in God's wrath," went on Fra Luca, "if you were a common sinner, with degrees of good and ill, I should not venture all on so slight a chance. But who is your equal? The wild inventions of your rage appal the breathless world. Are men not crucified by your order—nailed against the wall in the very posture of the Christ who died to save men's souls?"

Ezelin smiled.

"I own I had a whim," he said, "to see the thing in practice, as I have tried most other modes of death."

"Men have been known to stop short in guilt like yours, and go God's way in sharp conversion, when less sin has shown a stubborn face to Heaven. And so to-day I summon you to God."

"Ay, you are right," answered the other; "I

The Lion's Den

care not for half guilt, nor do I love to play with middling sins. If you could make me feel half the thrill in what you call virtue that I feel in what you call evil, who knows but what I might haste headlong to God? I love to kill; and that's the hitch."

By this time the ecstatic seemed to have forgotten all idea of self and of his own great peril, and his words poured forth fast and abundant.

"The Archangel's foot has ever stood victorious on the neck of Evil," he cried—"in every struggle of every land and every time. Oh, there's a radiance in Good's face that conquers and fascinates the soul."

"Speak for your own," said Ezelin, with a little laugh.

"It triumphs," cried Fra Luca, "even as the sun quells night at dawn——"

"And night," the despot interrupted, with another little laugh, "subdues the whole great world again at dusk."

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Oh, there are none of man's great thrills like love," the other went on, growing more and more impassioned. "You know not the raptures of self-sacrifice that run from God to man, from man to God—the ecstasy of pardon and of mercy, that gives us here below a foretaste of God's heaven. . . . Good runs like a thread through all nature. Look out upon the forests: see how God warms the bosom of the wintry tree, and makes the sap leap up. . . . See how He fills each clod with heat and life, and sends the rain to the young leaves, and saves the nesting birds, and makes the grain sprout in a million blades beneath the quickening ray!"

"I look on nature," answered Ezelin, folding his arms, and speaking as coldly and slowly as the other had spoken with vehemence—"I look on nature and see but pain—successful violence, and the strong that prey upon the weak, the great that prey upon

The Lion's Den

the small: beast, bird, fish, reptile, through the livelong day—and man, the Slaughterer, preying upon them all. All nature means destruction. Your wheat sprouts only to be trampled, or to fall under the sickle of the strong, whose feet trample the fields of others. Where is the field that never knew a battle, and whose young blades of green were never fertilised with blood? Who bids the earthquake run, the hurricane whirl forth? Whose are the mighty hands that wield flame, flood, and lightning? If it is He whom we call God, why, then, His pack devour what He himself brought forth; and if it is the other darker power, why, then that power has mastery over God and what God made, and rules the world.”

“What!” cried the hermit—“when every shower brings forth fresh shoots, and when the pale green blades sprout on the very ashes of your wars, yea, on your victims’ very graves! Oh, all is swayed by love in the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

long run. There is mercy beneath the stars, and good outliveth all!"

But Ezelin, scarcely seeming to hear him, went on, with a gloomy, half-absent look on his white face.

"When I was a mere child, long before I dreamed of racks and dungeons, I loved to torture the small things that I had caught—the fly whose wings I tore, the bird I blinded, the beast I maimed. Oh, then my pulses thrilled with a new rapture, and I longed to find new torments, till I strained the limbs of men, and longed to design new engines for their use. To me the sight of pain is like strong wine; and when it means revenge for human hate and human treasons, or when it means the spread of fear, on which my power rests, it flushes and intoxicates my soul."

"Oh, horrible," cried Fra Luca. "And, after such dread scenes, did you never hear God's whisper? Amid the roll of organ thunder, where the scanty light of some great

The Lion's Den

minster stole through the high-arched aisles, did this fell soul of yours never writhe and fight with its own self, never cower and bow down to the Lord of Lords? Have you never felt His presence when looking down the wonders of the great columned vistas, where, like sunset fire, some glorious red rose window flamed alone in luminous bloom? And when the incense rose higher and higher, have you never watched the stoled and mitred ministrants stand glimmering at the altar in dim gold, calling your soul to heaven?"

"Talk not to me of priests and minsters," answered Ezelin. "Even from of old, the Church and I have been foes; and foes we shall be to the bitter end. But if I were willing to share the plunder, oh! then they would saint me, and we should see St. Ezelin enshrined. God has not dared to hurl His thunderbolt just where I happened to be—though once it struck a wayside cross, and spared myself, who was riding hard by."

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Judge not thy God," retorted the ecstatic.
"He bides His time."

"And makes Himself meanwhile my chief accomplice," sneered the other, "since by His mere nod He might have stopped me on my impious way. Go back to Him, if you have got His ear—or to the Pope; 'tis much the same—and say that Ezelin has neither mercy nor fear, and in spite of either, will carve his destiny, and govern this broad plain as suits his whim. I fear not God."

The hermit lifted his hands as if to ward off some thunderbolt from above.

"Clothe yourself in sackcloth," he cried; "heap the dust and ash upon your impious head. Heap, heap it high, and sue for mercy before the coming of the dreadful crash!"

Ezelin seemed but moderately impressed by the recommendation.

"I will collect the ash, if that be all," he said. "There happen to be a few rebel strongholds which it were unwise to leave unburned."

The Lion's Den

"Though you should appal the sky with your scoff till dusk," the other retorted, "you will brave in vain the final doom, God's writing on the wall."

There came through the open casement a chanting of monks, and the tops of the banners of a procession went swaying by.

"Do you hear?" he cried.

"Some monkish train, droning its way along," said Ezelin, with contempt.

"It is one that is wending to take the sacrament to those in pain. And as the chant of that procession blends with your blaspheming, so the great appeal of God pervades all evil. It descends to nature's depths. Just as the dark germs in earth's cold breast feel the first loud call of spring, and quiver and awake, so health and weal awake at God's great call in every living thing—in man, and beast, and plant, to help and save and heal and mend—were it but the broken wing of a shot bird. In the forest it is the wave of

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

sap that wells up in answer to God's hest. And in the heart—yea, even in that of the meanest slave—it is love, rapture, hope, and faith. They attest God's strength and leap to heaven. Will you alone, of all your kind, keep God's strong sap repressed, shut out the summons from your heart, and let men call you till your final hour the Giver of Pain?"

"Ay, let me so be known," said the Emperor's Vicar with a sombre deliberation. "Pain is the base of fear, and fear is the base of power. Let me be plain. I am no man of lust. I never wasted my time in a woman's bower. I care not for your sparkling wine, nor trust my ducats to the hazard of the dice. I take as hard a bed, as hard a crust, as any of my soldiers. I loathe the world's coarse vice. I live for power. That is the passion which shapes my life—the lonely passion of an icy heart. And do you dare, presumptuous monk, to dictate to one like

The Lion's Den

me, and bid me to my face pull down the edifice of state that I have slowly raised? I grant that the base is pain: 'tis a good base. I grant that the cement is blood: 'tis good cement. And every stone sits firmly in its place, and the whole stands proudly for men's wonder. I have no love for love, no love for human good, and, loving neither, seek them not. I have walked the way I chose, and stand like Satan on a lonely turret, above a threatening flood, loathing and loathed."

He paused. Then in a slightly different tone:—

"This is an idle hour," he said, "in which it suits my whim to discuss of God and man, of good and ill—else you would be on the rack before talking thus to Ezelin. It happens that to-day I've had my fill of racking. Even for us, who make a cunning art of torture, there may sometimes be surfeit. Even that may pall. And that is why I have given you a patient hearing, with the tor-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

mentors at my beck. So now, ere appetite returns, begone. I'll rule as I have ruled."

A great prophetic light shone on the ecstatic's face.

"Then let the vials of God's wrath," he cried, "pour down upon you through my mouth, as once in days of old they fell on Ahab's head. The whoredoms of your mother Jezebel cry up to heaven against you. Every tongue of earthly flame that you have lit shall breed in hell a million more for you to parch among for ever and for ever. Every shriek of agony that you have caused shall swell the song of triumph when the demons wreak their pleasure on your soul; and every drop of guiltless blood that you have shed shall go to swell a stream of boiling gore, whose terrific billows shall toss round you when the cup of all your crimes is full!"

"An ample store for my unworthy soul," said the other, with the same cold chuckling laugh as before. "I thank you for your inte-

The Lion's Den

rest, though I had heard the tune already, and knew that there were many things in hell."

And fastening on the ecstatic two coldly laughing eyes, he raised a curtain, and, with a gesture of dismissal, disappeared behind it.

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That night Fra Luca had a vision.

He saw, in the midst of wild and solitary mountains, a great wall of rock lit by the setting sun. Upon it there suddenly appeared two gigantic shadows, sitting opposite to each other, and apparently playing at dice. And Fra Luca knew them to be Death and his mother Sin. And he heard their voices, distinct, but as it were unsubstantial, which seemed to come from a great distance.

"Play, Mother Sin," said Death. "The luck must turn at last; and 'tis high time."

"Make not too sure," said Sin.

"We play for a mighty stake," said Death;

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"even for the soul of one more loved of hell, more loathed of heaven, than any that earth contains."

"A king's gold crown shall still adorn his brow," said Sin. "As the dice fell when last we played, so will they fall to-day. The dice will rattle lifewards."

"Play, Sin, play," urged Death.

"Thou art impatient."

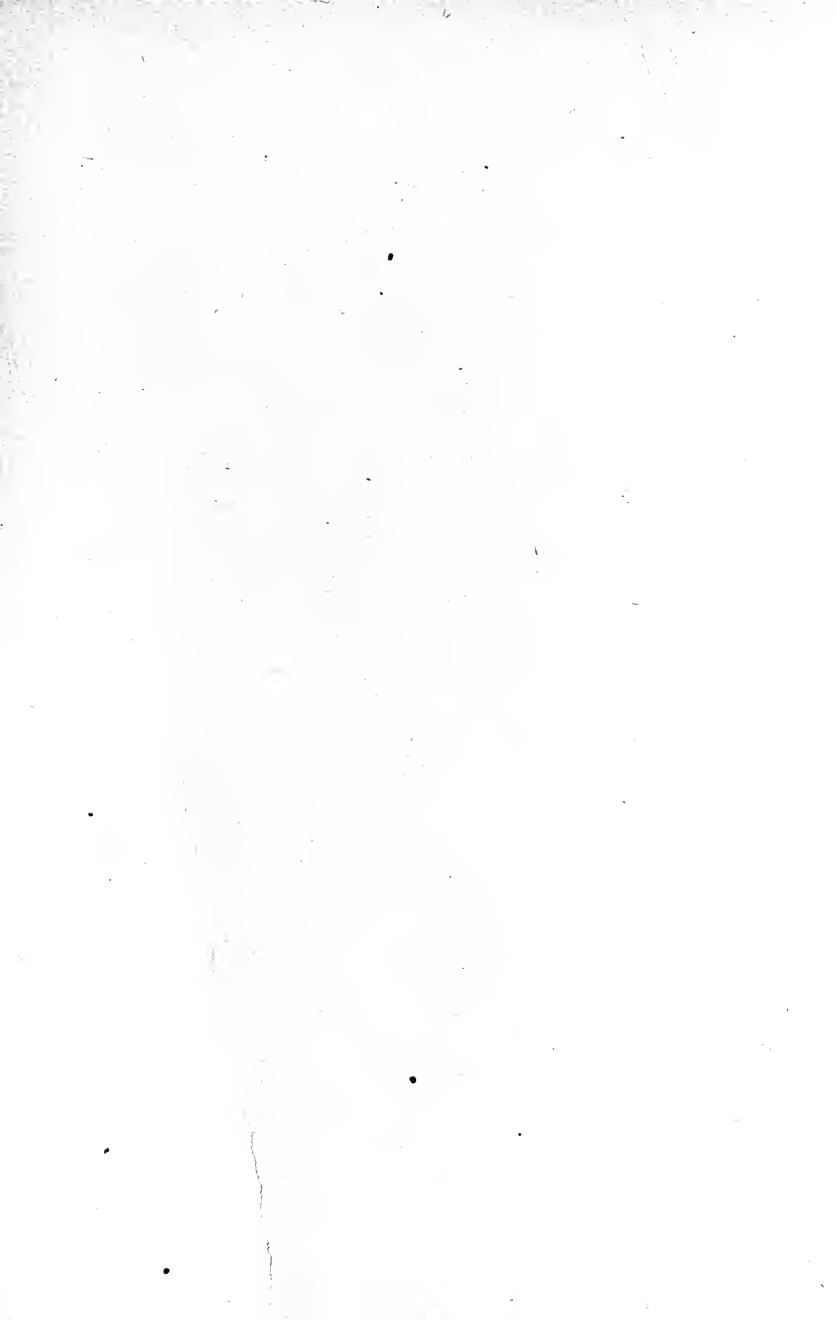
"Ay, Mother Sin; I long to clutch him," Death answered.

Then Sin lifted the dice on high, and cast them.

"Did I not say so?" she cried. "Twelve. I win! I win!"

II.

Gisla.



CHAPTER V.

DARK PLOTTING.

IT was some years since Ezelin had married Gisla. She was a daughter of the great house of San Bonifazio, one of the most powerful of the March. The marriage was childless, and the despot and his wife had no ground of common interest. His only confidant was his mother, the dark and sinister Adalhita, whose knowledge of those black arts which had so strong an attraction for the men and women of the thirteenth century, had spread her fame even beyond the borders of North Italy. From her he had no secrets. He confided to her all his thoughts, all his dreams, all his crimes; and she gave him in return all her art, all her skill, all her evil. She hated Gisla with a hatred that only the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

bad can feel for the good, and would certainly have got rid of her long before, if Ezelin had not needed his wife as a link to unite him to the powerful family to which she belonged.

Recent studies of morbid psychology and of the relation of insanity to crime, make it easier for us to understand certain dark personalities who appeared terribly sane to their contemporaries. Their occult dealings with powers whose existence none questioned must have seemed terribly real to themselves and to others. Where all believed in the incredible, why should any have thought to explain it by mental disease? And when the really mad were above the sane in power, and beyond the reach of observation, there was practically no limit to their baleful activity. Adalhita lived in a world of evil spirits, imaginary perhaps for us, but only too real for those who might at any moment be at her mercy. Stimulating, as there is now

Dark Plotting

reason to believe, her nightly visions with the potent drug that the Saracens had brought with them to Europe, she pushed her hashish-born imaginings even to the very throne of Evil. Her worldly ambition, which was boundless, and which centred in the prospects of her son, was intimately connected with her occult researches; and the power that she wielded in the shadowy world of demons was as unchallenged as that which she felt herself wielding in the tangible world of living men. What wonder, therefore, if she brought the one to bear upon the other?

Among the people, there was no end to the dark stories of magic and poison—some of them real enough—that were whispered about her; and many a serf looked up with a shudder to the light that burned in her turret window in the small hours of the night. Had she been of the humble, she would probably long since have ended her career at the stake. But she was safe as one of the great ones of

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the world, and safer still as the mother of Ezelin.

"You have been again with your astrologer," she said to him one day. "How go the stars; and how fares yours?"

"It does not wane," he answered.

"It is a star of a darker red than Mars," said Adalhita, "and crosses hell, not heaven. In thought, I watch it every night with sleepless eyes. I watch your wars, your power's fast-growing structure. Does that power stand firm?"

"I think so," he replied. "It rests on deep-dug dungeons, where the light of heaven does not intrude—on dungeons that grow more crowded every day in every city between the Po and yonder Alps. With new tormenting engines of my own fantastic device, I spread such fear in men's white hearts as earth has never known; while prayer for life can never reach the ear of my dark Saracen hounds. As, one by one, Padua, Vicenza,

Dark Plotting

Verona, Mantua, have called me lord, so, before six months are out, Milan will kneel for mercy, and the whole of this great Lombard plain will hail your son as the master of its fear."

"That's well," said Adalhita. "Your words make my soul flash like a thunder-cloud. You know not what high powers of night control your life, what dark-winged messengers of ill fly round you. I feel a dark delight at each fresh step; but I were gladder still if I could see you rule in your own right what grows to be a kingdom—not as mere Imperial Vicar. Only last night I saw you in the magic crystal sphere in which I read Fate's secrets, riding again with a king's insignia. Every figure in your royal train was dark, but clear. Above your head flew your evil angels. Beneath your war-steed's hoofs was a corpse-strewn plain. You rode over the dead."

"Do you think, mother, that I do not

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

dream of crowns and sceptres too? But the time is not yet ripe. Whatever I do must still be done in Frederick's name. I have to climb the ladder of his favour higher yet, before I cast it down. Besides, I have other thoughts in connection with Frederick, other means in reserve, which must be tried before we talk of placing a crown upon my head."

"Other means, my son?"

"Other means. He has a bastard daughter, born of a Syrian slave by the wells of Jaffa."

"Selvaggia?"

"Ay, Selvaggia. She is the very pet of his soul. The man to whom he grants Selvaggia's hand, will rule Frederick's heart."

An evil light of intelligence flashed in Adalhita's eyes.

"And so you need my spells," she said, laughing between her teeth, "to send your present wife from out this land of naughtiness to heaven? What disease shall take

Dark Plotting

her to the angels? Shall we stand round a quick deathbed, or watching slow degrees? My arts are at your service."

"I shall seek your help in due course, good mother," answered Ezelin; "not to-day, nor yet perhaps to-morrow. There is a freak of dark fantastic fun which I mean to play some day upon my gentle Gisla, before we spice her meat with death and send her up to her winged friends in Paradise. It is a whimsical experiment that I plan on her wits, with spectral artifice of crazing apparitions in the wan, maddening twilight. She shall see such shapes as the black caves of fear have never yet sent forth since madness first began to prowl round human reason. I'll send her up to heaven; but she shall leave her wits on earth."

"My soul craves no keener joy," answered Adalhita.

CHAPTER VI.

LIONELLO.

WHILE peril was thus secretly closing round Gisla, there was one who kept his eyes constantly upon her—one who had long known the hatred that threatened her life, and who watched every move on the part of her enemies, determined to save her. Lionello, the captain of Ezelin's Lombard troops, had conceived one of those semi-religious attachments for her person, of which the Middle Ages have left us several examples, side by side with so many devotions of a very different character. Nor, in her case, did such an attachment seem in any way strange. There was so much of the saint in the woman that anything different would have seemed out of the question. And perhaps

Lionello

there was something of the saint in the man as well—at least there certainly was wherever she was concerned.

Their friendship went back many years, to the time of their childhood, and to an adventure that only the wonderful century to which they belonged could have made possible. One summer, when Gisla was ten or eleven, a strange sight astonished the people of Lombardy. The roads and the lanes were filled with innumerable children, pouring southwards and seawards from Germany and the Alps. The children were hungry, were foot-sore; many of them in rags, and dropping like tired sheep in the wayside ditches, sometimes cruelly hounded on by those who affected to lead them. Thousands upon thousands pushed on, singing their way to the sea, which was to open before them at the call of the Lord. It was the Children's Crusade. What their elders had done they were going to do. The sepulchre of Christ,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

which the big hands had been unable to keep, the little hands were about to reconquer.

From early morning, when the great round sun was rising low on their left, till the late afternoon, when the great round sun was sinking low on their right, they went chanting their endless hymn of hope and of faith, their endless dream of what was not to be—only that towards sunset the little voices were thinner and weaker, and knocked at God's doors with less force, and the little white faces were ever more wistful. And as each sunset came, it found the bands smaller and smaller, and the voices weaker and weaker.

And on and on they trooped, till the sea was reached, perishing as they went—destined never to find the holy goal of their fancy, but to be sold into slavery by merciless adventurers, and to end for the most part in the harems of Egypt, or worse. But their faith never flagged.

Lionello

And wherever they passed, fresh troops of boys and girls joined them and filled up the gaps in their ranks, mostly of course of the poorest sort—but not all. Mixed up with the rank and file of the Crusade—with those who had never worn shoes in their lives—were some whose shoes had never been of anything cheaper than satin, but who were glad enough now to wear the torn leather shoes that they took from the little feet that had trodden their last.

One day in the palace of the San Bonifazi there was a great scare. Gisla was not to be found. The palace was searched, the city was searched: she was gone. And along the highroads, among the thirty thousand children who crowded them, who was to find her? She had always been a strange, silent child, dreamy and mystical. The thought of the children marching to the Holy Land for the reconquest of Christ's sepulchre, which for her meant some vague, ineffable trans-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

cendence, had possessed her for weeks. There could be no doubt of it: she had joined them.

What the child Gisla went through during the many months of her disappearance, till she was finally discovered and rescued hundreds of miles away in a town of Southern Italy, was never thoroughly known: for she kept the details to herself. This only we know, that she owed her life to a boy crusader of thirteen, between whom and herself there sprang up a strange, childish affection in their terrible pilgrimage;—a boy who shared with her the miserable crusts that fell to his lot from the scanty doles of the towns and villages through which they passed; who watched over her when, utterly exhausted, she fell asleep in some ditch, or broke down in the stones and the dust; who stripped himself of his thin cloak to cover her up in the cold nights of autumn, and kept up her courage with his own unswerving belief. For

Lionello

they were marching to Fairyland, and the way to Fairyland is long.

Nor was Gisla more communicative when, years later, as the wife of Ezelin, she had recognised that same boy in Lionello, one of the captains of her husband's men-at-arms. Whatever memories of the great adventure of their childhood they may have exchanged with each other in private, they thought it wiser not to impart to others. Lionello was not the man to take advantage of that intimacy of the past, or to hope for preferment therefrom; and Gisla did nothing for her friend. Once only, when, in the siege of a castle, Lionello was wounded by a poisoned arrow, she sucked the wound in every man's sight and saved his life—that was all.

And now the time had come for Lionello once more to watch over her.

Love lent him eyes and ears that were even sharper than those of Ezelin's spies; and while he accumulated small signs of

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the impending peril, he silently prepared the means for defeating it.

Ah, if only she could realise the danger she was in! He had no lack of proof to lay before her; but what he feared was, that she would not believe the plot to be as black as it really was. And even if he succeeded in tearing the veil off her eyes, and in making her see the dreadful truth, what if she should not care to save herself? He feared that hers might be the stuff of which martyrs are made. What if she, about whose feet murder's streams were flowing, should see but the heaven on which her eyes were so steadily fixed, and refuse his help? It was wonderful enough, he thought, that she, a very saint of God, should till now have passed scatheless through all earth's horrors. But at last the tide of peril was creeping higher and higher; and if flight were now delayed, she was doomed. If he saved her not at once, nothing could save her. For

Lionello

some strong secret reason Ezelin had spared her life till now. Perhaps he needed the support of her family, which was powerful. Perhaps it was only the delay of the cat who plays with the mouse it can kill at any moment. Oh, he saw her fate approaching ever surer. Did he not know that the thought of a marriage with the Emperor's bastard daughter Selvaggia was working in Ezelin's soul? Had he not seen Ezelin's eyes resting of late on Gisla with the weight of doom? those cold fixed eyes that meant death when they were fastened on those whose death he needed? Only the day before, in the great hall, when all were rising from supper, had he not caught him whispering to his knaves and nodding in her direction? And so he determined to seize his opportunity.

CHAPTER VII.

GISLA'S SOUL.

THAT evening Lionello waited for Gisle in a passage leading to her rooms, and through which he knew she would have to pass on her way back from vespers. Presently he heard her step.

"What, you here," she cried; "God, what wild folly!"

"I had to seek you where—peril or no peril—I knew I should find you. There was no time for prudence. What I would fain have told you gradually — what I would fain have taken days to tell — I must now tell at once in two or three swift, perilous minutes. Mark me, and listen well. Danger is closing round you. Surely you understand? You are surrounded by foes as fell

Gisla's Soul

as hungry wolves; and your death has been decreed. Oh, interrupt me not! I have but a few minutes to speak, to warn, to tell my plan, and to save you."

"Save me, do you say?"

"Ay, save you; for I can: now or never. Chance has thrown in my way an opportunity that we must seize at once—this very night: to-morrow may be all too late. To-night the palace keys are in my hands. . . . Ezelin is away to-night. Oh, see, I say it on my bended knees. Oh, lose no time. Your life depends on flight. Ezelin and Adalhita have settled your death."

"I know they have no love for me," Gisla answered.

"I have surprised their secret plottings," Lionello continued; "I have overheard their murderous whispers; I have noted their disguised and guarded words. You are doomed."

"It does not take me wholly by surprise, my friend," she rejoined. "I have surmised

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

as much for many months. It had to end so sooner or later. And yet I did not think it would come so soon."

"Gisla, attend, attend," he cried passionately. "I have the means. To-night there will be nothing to mar my plan. It is I who keep ward over the city gates. The keys will all be brought to me to-night. The palace and the gaols are guarded by my men. I have the power—if God but help, and if the night be starless—to get you through before the third hour; to get you out of Ezelin's dominions—ay, far beyond; first to my brother's castle, a lonely place; then, helped by trusty hands, to some safe convent, where you can live unknown in peace and prayer. Meanwhile, by my command, it will be spread abroad that you have thrown yourself into the Adige, which flows conveniently at hand, hounded by your own to take your life—and you have cause, God knows. And now——"

Gisla's Soul

"This night, this very night?" she interrupted.

"At the third hour," he said.

"O God," she cried. "With what delight does my spirit offer up the thanks it owes for Thy great gift! 'Tis Thou who, from on high, hast sent me this great chance!"

"So you agree to fly? You'll let me save you?" he exclaimed.

She shook her head.

"Alas, my friend," she answered slowly and sadly, "I fear it cannot be; and if I have to die, I have to die. 'Tis but what comes sooner or later to us all. Yet do I thank you much, for you are very noble."

He stood thunderstruck.

"O God, do I hear you right?" he cried. "What! You don't clutch at this chance? What! You would stay for death, and miss the means of life that you can touch with your hand? And yet you thank Heaven in the same breath? O God, what can she mean?"

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"I mean that there is one who is in greater need than I am. Deep beneath this palace, in the dungeons where they do the things you know, a poor youth is lying, who will die by torture before sunrise for having cursed the name of Ezelin. The horror of it cries up to God's throne. You know whom I mean: the lad Egidio. Ay, he dies at dawn. So young; a beardless boy; nay, not eighteen. He can be dressed in woman's clothes, and have his life and freedom in my stead. It would be easy to——"

But Lionello interrupted her with violence.

"God, was there ever such madness upon earth?" he cried. "What, was it to save another that I've watched and planned and made all sure? Was it for this that I have given my whole soul's strength to save you — that I've manned the walls with trusty men? I tell you, it is God's command that you be saved. It's God's command. They're bent on your destruction."

Gisla's Soul

She looked at him with her long, quiet look.

"Well, and what then?" she said, laying her hand on his arm. "Suppose they have planned my death, as you say: my body is clay, and they can kill it. But can the gaolers pen my soul in their dark dungeons? Can they bring my spirit to the scaffold? Men are powerless over that. Ezelin can wring no victory over it. Oh, do not think, Lionello," she went on, as she noted the anguish in his face, "that I lightly fling your generous help away; that, on the brink of terror and death, I do not acknowledge the greatness of your offer. It is a link to bind our souls together for all time. But life at best is fraught with pain and sorrow. Death is the common lot. And if, as I have sometimes thought, you care for Gisla's soul—if I am dearer to you than a mere friend, and if love that has never sought to pass your lips nor reach my ear, lurks in

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

your heart—oh! let us save this boy. Love, let us save him!”

“‘Love’?” he cried, “‘love’? Oh, did I hear your lips say ‘love’? I know you would not play with words at such a moment. Ay, there is love in my heart: love that is scarcely of this earth; no alloy of sin is in it. There is a saint above that I pray to, that is all; and her name . . . O Gisla, I have felt my spirit move in silent prayer when I have seen that sad sweet smile upon your lips. But now my spirit struggles in agony to save you. It is a game between life and death; and God grants you but few minutes for decision. Ezelin——”

“Listen;” she interrupted him in her turn; “listen. There are moments in our dreadful lives when what should otherwise be locked within the walls of thought may out—times when the soul puts on, as it were, God’s snowy mantle—times in which no sin can find a place, because Heaven is looking on.

Gisla's Soul

And such a moment is this. So I can tell you now what I had otherwise never breathed—that there is one who has loved you in her sorrows, and who, you know well, can never love but purely. And by all the love that is in her soul, by all the glow of life's last sunset, and by the dreadful pall of death, she prays you: save that boy!”

“Speak not of him,” Lionello answered hoarsely; “I save yourself or none.”

“Oh, your words fall like a knell upon my soul,” she said, “and all grows dim. I will not escape. I cannot leave the post where God has set me, till His cherubim relieve the watch; where—though it was at most one in a hundred—I have been able to save some life now and again. Least of all will I fly at the cost of one who is guiltless, and whom we could now save.”

“O God,” he cried, with a terrible urgency, “she cannot see death closing round her. I tell you the air is heavy with murder all

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

about you. Can it be that you are deaf and blind to every proof that others see and hear? Unless you fly, don't you know that under this dreadful roof no earthly help can reach you? Night is dumb, and this one may be your last. At any moment they may smother you with pillows."

She smiled a smile of infinite sadness. "With pillows?" she said. "Well, Death might come in less kind guise than that—here where it takes so many dreadful shapes. Pillows? I think that some of the soft down that my guardian angel shakes from his great white wings will fill them. What sweet peace such a death would bring me! . . . For though nature makes our flesh cling to life, oh! it were sweet to cease this earthly struggle; and though I mean to stay as long as they will let me, yet there would be ease, oh! there would be ease in sleep."

He caught her by the wrist.

"No, no, no!" he cried, with a violence

Gisla's Soul

that would have swept away a less stubborn resistance. "However mad you may be, you shall not die. God has sent me here to-day, and I will save you in your own despite."

"You could but save a part," she said, gently disengaging her hand. "You could but save my body, nothing more. My soul must seek for freedom through a Greater—and something tells me it will soon be free. And now it is time to end this last farewell. I have but time to say one other word. I cannot force you, friend, to save that other life; but when I am dead, you will wish you had done so. Do not avenge me. And now bend your lips to mine. On earth all is over. But we shall meet, perhaps, beyond." And with these words she drew his face down to hers, and in another moment she was gone.

She was gone, and he had failed. He looked round, bewildered and stupid. What darkness there was overhead! How black the world, in which he now stood alone, had suddenly

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

become! He had thought that there still was light in heaven. But she was gone, and none could save her now. Despair and darkness filled the night and the world. O God, what man could cope with such a soul as hers? How clammy and cold was the cloak that Despair had wrapped suddenly about him! Where was the hope that had flickered bright but a few minutes ago? There was no light from heaven or from earth. He stood groping blindly with outstretched hands, and he grasped but empty blackness.

But that night, and about the third hour, the men-at-arms who were posted at one of the gates had a curious experience which gave them subject for talk and cogitation during the following day. The Captain of the Gate had given them at dusk an order not to strike a light, whatever they might hear, an order in itself sufficiently unusual to keep them awake. By-and-by they became aware that

Gisla's Soul

horses were waiting silently beneath the wall. They had not heard them arrive, and saw them through the darkness as one sees shapes appear and disappear in a fog. Presently a man, heavily cloaked, and with him a woman, arrived and let themselves out by the postern. The woman was singularly tall. Next day it was known that the youth Egidio, who was to have been executed at sunrise for contempt of Ezelin, had escaped from the prisons.

CHAPTER VIII.

EBLIS.

FOR all that, things went on for a while in Ezelin's palace much as usual, so far as external life was concerned. It was noticed, however, that he was frequently with his mother.

There were strange rumours afloat respecting these mysterious interviews between Ezelin and Adalhita. An idea existed among the people that it was in her dark and dreaded chamber that the despot found the secret of his power and the chief inspiration of his cruelties, and in the palace itself his visits to her were watched and counted with something like a shudder. And yet his attendants little suspected how much stranger and how much more awful than their wildest imaginings were the words that a hidden listener—if

Eblis

any had been so careless of death and of torture as to play the eavesdropper—would have heard. Whatever may be thought of the revelations made about this time by Adalhita to her son, whether real or imaginary, this much is certain, that they were real for him, and, as such, powerfully affected his soul, and reacted on his deeds for the greater evil of men.

It was on one of these occasions, when he had been delighting Adalhita with the details of the fantastic moral torture that he was preparing for Gisla, that his mother made the first allusion to what was destined to prove so momentous in his life.

"Oh, you are rare," she said. "The spirit of your father makes you weave such plots as this."

Ezelin looked up in surprise.

"My father?" he exclaimed. "Why, dull prayer and fast and penance, not such freaks as this, were the only things he thought of."

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

An expression of infinite contempt passed over the old woman's face, where lingered a beauty that the wrinkles made only more weird and sibylline.

"Not that dull grunting and omnivorous swine who took the cowl begat you. Your veins run with fiery evil straight from its divine first springs. No, no, not he."

"If not his son, then whose?" asked Ezelin.
"Who was it, mother?"

"A mighty lord."

"The Duke of Beneventum?"

"One yet greater," she answered.

"Was it King Tancred?"

"One adored by Tancred as his liege."

"I guess it now," cried Ezelin. "It was Imperial Henry—he whose fury gored the heart of Naples."

"Greater still," Adalhita said darkly.

"Earth had no greater lord," he objected.

"Ay, but beyond. Is there not heaven above and hell below? Your father rules

Eblis

the millions who have assumed Pain's stole for ever. He is lord of lords where all the lips implore, and none reply."

At her words a shadow seemed to pass over Ezelin like a swiftly sailing cloud, and he quailed.

"Ay," Adalhita went on, "you well may cower. Listen. In those days my cheek was white as the pale, death-fed mushroom that grows where murder rots. My locks were like black adders, and evil brewed in my heart. One night, nine months before your birth, I crouched by the open window of the castle, looking out into the dark. A fitful muttering, as if of souls in pain, fell ever and again on my ear, with sultry storm-gusts, like inarticulate evil. No light comforted the towers round which the moon-struck wolves had howled for three nights, and a flight of ill-omened birds had revolved for three days. No light, save when a silent flash of sheet-lightning displayed the moat, where dissolved

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

rotting weeds, and showed the water-snakes at play. What made me feel as if an evil power were closing round the battlements? It seemed to wheel nearer and nearer round them in the air,—a power to which no Christian soul might kneel, but to which I yearned as I had never yearned to God. The night was black as ink. I could not pray, but I crouched with loosened hair. By the last flash that gave a dexterous twitch—just off and on again—to Midnight's cloak, I saw nine witches down in the castle moat, and I heard them sing a nuptial hymn of horror.

“Then the thunder growled ever louder, and a vampire's shriek stabbed the darkness at intervals. All round the castle the ghouls were prowling, and the soulless corpses were as restless as the fleshless souls that muttered round me.

“The great peals shook the castle from base to turret. Was it he who circled round them while I cowered with heavy drops of sweat?

Eblis

In the thick darkness I could not see his terrific shape, but I seemed to feel him groping for me; while every now and then the running finger of the storm scribbled fiery, cabalistic Z's on the sky's black page. I writhed like a worm in a bird's talons. In every peal, louder and louder as the echo spread, I heard my name:

“‘Adalhita! Adalhita!’

“And mighty wings sounded like the roaring of a tempest-churned sea.

“‘Lord, who art thou?’ I cried.

“‘I am he,’ answered the Voice, ‘whom the Saracens call Eblis, and the Franks entitle Satan. I am he who holds the keys of Thought’s dark rooms—the Rebel in whose ranks those sullen angels serve, whose dewless wings cast evil as a shadow. I am he whose palace rings with an eternal Never.’

“‘Away! Away!’ I cried, as I shrank and cowered; ‘thy presence flings dark glare like glowing lava.’

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

“‘I come across the night,’ thrilled the Voice, ‘ere Death has made thee mine. Thou hast shot into my heart a ray of blackest light. Evil clay, I love thee.’

“‘Spare me,’ I shrieked; ‘whirl back into the night. Thy limbs are of dark fire.’

“‘No, thou art mine,’ the Voice resumed. ‘I pant by night and day for thy fell beauty as fiercely as any of the waterless that fight round hell’s mock springs. In the great vaults of wrath, in the sleepless caverns whose eternal darkness is lit only by the pools of molten stone that bathe the lost, and where, in the red light, the black shadows dance, I sit upon my throne as on a rock, and watch the lakes of torment, taciturn and lone, craving thee mine. And now . . .’

“‘Flesh is no match for thy terrific substance,’ I shrieked. ‘My soul will catch eternal fire!’

“And I swooned in night and flame.”

Such was Adalhita’s revelation to her son;

Eblis

and Ezelin welcomed it with a dark rapture such as his soul had never known before.

"Eblis," he thought, "Eblis for my father? Eblis the Wonderful, the Dark, the Dread? The Shadow looming across eternal fire?" An awe crept over him, such as dark chasms instil, an awe at his own self. He would fain have been screened from his own substance. Eblis' self, had she said? Then he was very man and very fiend, even as Christ was very God and very Man. Yes, he felt it in him. Long before he had ever guessed what rills of flaming Phlegethon ran in his veins, had he not felt his pulses swell with joy at human pain, and had he not played the fiend untaught? Could not the Fiend, as well as God, live incarnate in human clay? Was not the earth the meeting-ground of heaven and hell? Why should not he, Ezelin, be hell's incarnation?

Ay, but the day of death and the day of Judgment? Would his parentage entail eter-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

nal fire, or princely power and sway in the great vaults of terror? Should he quail, or thrill with awful exultation?

He asked himself the question.

Oh, he felt the answer in all its glory.

“All hail, all hail, O King of the Dark Red Glare!” he cried. “Behold, I kneel and bow myself before thee,—I, thy son, to whom the silent years at last reveal his mighty lineage. Father, I have done thy service. I have drunk deep from the black wells of cruelty. I have said the word of mercy unto none. Yea, I have made hells of my cities. I have foreburned thy damned. I have teased with fire innumerable feet and filled the world with yells. O father, O pain-inflicter, art thou pleased with thy Paduan son? Oh, I will fill the cup of torture that I have seized on thy shadowy altar higher and higher, and drink thy health at the terrific banquet-board of evil, in toasts of torment, in wine of boundless pain!”

CHAPTER IX.

DREADFUL BOUNDARIES.

MADNESS that all know to be mad, Madness that wears its cap and bells in the market-place, is terrible enough. But Madness that wears the sober cap of Sanity is more terrible still. And so is Madness that is mad to-day and sane to-morrow. And what of Madness that wears the cap of another sort of Madness than its own? And what of Madness that has a sane side to it that it never is seen without, like the particoloured garments that were in fashion in those very ages—black to the right and red to the left, or green to the front and yellow to the back?

If there is in human nature one boundary which it is well to define, it is that which separates the two great realms of sanity and

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

mental disease. And yet how difficult! For the limits are as restless as those of two countries that are divided from each other by a network of shifting rivers. What belonged to the one overnight, belongs to the other at dawn. What the one could claim yesterday, is claimed back again to-day by the other.

Ezelin was lord of that terrible March which separates the two great realms of the human mind, and we find him pushing his incursions now into the one, and now into the other. And none could tell in which of those two realms to seek for him next.

To say that Ezelin was mad would be easy enough. Yet Ezelin was sane—terribly sane in the world of statecraft and of war. To say that he was sane would be to leave out one whole side of his nature. His mere freaks, in which he loved to set the ordinary rules of thought at defiance, and to puzzle the mind while he tortured the body, would be proof enough of that. There was only

Dreadful Boundaries

one person for whom he was perhaps comprehensible, and that was Adalhita; for it was surely from her that he had inherited this duality of his character. His paternal ancestors, whatever they had been, had been cut in one piece, had been ordinary human beings, each in his way. But on his mother's side there was madness, and yet at the same time cold, deliberate policy: madness that ran sometimes into frenzy, and policy that never for a moment lost its balance. And therefore it was that he would consult her on things of this earth and on things beyond this earth; on actions that needed the coolest head in the world, and on actions that needed a brain that had no ballast. Had you asked his imperial master, he would probably have told you that Ezelin was the sanest man in Italy. But had you questioned Ezelin's own knaves, the *âmes damnées* who helped him in his freaks, their answer would perhaps have been different.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

And so, just about this time, the Imperial Vicar's day was taken up by matters which might well have been referred to both of those two different sides of his mind. He spent many hours developing his military power: attending with infinite patience to the minutest details required for warlike efficiency; dictating letters to the Emperor, to the Emperor's Chancellor, and to the governors of his own cities; listening to endless reports of his agents and spies, and examining the plans of his architects for new fortalices and new prisons in Padua, in Vicenza, in Mantua, in Belluno, especially for the famous dungeons of the "Zilie" and the "Malta." At night he would confer for hours with his astrologers, when not following his mother's dark practices. But all this yet left him time for rehearsals in which he taxed the resources of the most ingenious of his varlets and braves. With them he was no longer Ezelin the great captain, the great ruler, reliable in his pitiless

Dreadful Boundaries

strength—but another Ezelin, no less real, and perhaps yet more terrible: Ezelin the actor, the patron of mummers, who, mad himself, was rehearsing his part with the coldness of Sanity in the royal robes of Folly.

CHAPTER X.

THE KING OF THE MAD.

THE sun was sinking in a rosy bed of quilted cloud. Gisla was sitting alone by the window of a long silent gallery. She could not take her eyes off the restless outlines, where head on head and face on face kept taking shape. In vain her teased brain tried to see but cloud. Two days ago, had not a skull grinned down at her horribly from out of the clouds? And to-day . . . Look there! Look there! . . . Again that strange wolf's head that plagued her so. . . . A wolf; most distinctly a wolf; a wolf of cloud. And now it took a human shape, and seemed to be the head of Ezelin. . . . Oh, she could bear the clouds no more.

And yet, as she looked at the sun, whose

The King of the Mad

beams were twinkling and fast dwindling on the bar of the horizon, how she yearned to keep it there a little longer, if only a few short minutes. She could have cried out to the sun not to leave her so soon again to wage her lonely war with Twilight and with Madness. "I have no help but thine, O Daylight," she thought: "no shield but thine against the shapes that are I know not what. . . ."

And he, clad in terror, who visited her every day at nightfall, even the beckoning, straw-crowned Monarch of the Mad—was he not there, there behind those doors? And again she cried to the sun to stay on the horizon. How she clung to the last vestige of the ray that was dwindling! It seemed somehow as if she would never see him fling his morning darts again.

And now he was gone, and the torturing dusk was drowning every helpless thing in livid waves of shadow. One by one, through

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the wan gallery in which she was locked, the motley spectres would pass in all their horror, and begin their crazy, soundless nods and becks, till she and they became akin in empty wits:

“I think that I am sane,” she said to herself—“at least as yet!”

Would Heaven not come to her help? She was but a weak woman, who in vain—too often in vain—had tried, on the path of blood and power, to save a few ill-fated wretches from the hand that had no pulse of mercy. Ah, if Death knew what a service he could do her! . . . But no; she would brace her heart-strings more than ever. She would renew her fight with Dusk and Madness. She would face and challenge each mad phantom—make it speak; or she would break the silence of that monstrous place at least with her own voice. Though flesh was weak, she would be strong to-night. . . . But, ah God, here they came. . . .

The King of the Mad

She cowered back, shuddering, with her eyes fixed on the darkening depths of the gallery.

It was the blue one, the one whose limbs and cheeks seemed made of pale blue ice. She felt her own limbs growing numb; but she would bar its way.

The finger of the freezing shape was on its lip. Did it mean that it was dumb?—Well, then, let it speak by signs.—The dim blue rags that draped its silence quaked like aspens, and its weed-like locks trembled on its nape. “What art thou?” she forced herself to ask. “Art thou the Cold?—Thou shakest thy head. Art thou perhaps the Ague?—No? not that? Then thou art Fear?”

The figure nodded.

“Fear? Fear of what?”

The phantom passed its finger slowly across its throat.

She held on to the panel of the gallery,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

to keep herself from falling. Her woman's strength had bounds. But she recovered herself, and forced herself to speak.

"Ah," she said, "is it that they are at? How soon? I need to know it. How many of these twilights have I still to live, before they sink my body in the moat?"

The figure held up four fingers.

"What, not five?" Gisla said. "But four days more? Well, pass upon thy ways, phantom. Thou givest me all thou hast to give—four dusks to rise to heaven."

She raised her eyes in prayer, and a strange rapture came into her face. But it vanished suddenly; and once more she stared, shuddering, into the gloom.

For craze and hell still interrupted. Look there! Look there! . . . What new and monstrous figure was swaying and groping towards her? A headless monk? . . . The air grew black with horror. Horror shrunk her skin, and was raising all the roots of

The King of the Mad

her hair. It was for her that he was groping. She felt her wits beginning to leave her; and she had to tack and steer, so as to avoid him; for she felt that if only he touched her, Madness would win the day. And he groped and groped, and seemed to feel her close to him.

“Avaunt! avaunt! avaunt!” she shrieked. But she was wasting her breath: he had no eyes to see, no ears to hear. She felt that he was Horror—Horror fresh from death upon the scaffold. And he groped and groped, as if he felt her already under his vague white hands. . . . “Help, God,” she cried; for nature could not cope with such shapes as these.

And Gisla swooned.

Had some hand of mercy closed Thought’s window? Now it opened slowly again. She wondered whether she could stand upon her feet. The shades of dusk had grown. She was alone, and nothing was to be seen in

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the long pale gallery. Alone? Perhaps all was over for that night. And yet, did he not come every evening with his crown of straw and scarlet mantle? He had set his heart upon her conquest. Did he mean, she wondered, when he had wrapped her in his shadowy toils, to make her for all eternity his queen—Queen of the Mad? Oh, better far than this would be Fear's cut throat. O God, had she not been throughout the whole of that long day half his already? "Oh, my God," she cried, "I will be sane, I will be sane, I will be sane."

And there he stood, terrific on the threshold. Once again he was trying his power. She dared not turn her back—she dared not shut her eyes. In the waning light, his scarlet mantle glimmered almost black. Tonight he made neither sign nor beck nor nod, but, like a shadow, circled round and round her as soundlessly as if he were treading on wadded velvet. "Keep off! keep off!"

The King of the Mad

she shrieked. "Protect me, oh! my God! Madness is closing on me!" And with a sudden, desperate movement, as if to tear her way through hell to heaven, she snatched off the phantom's mask. She staggered back: Ezelin stood before her.

"Yes," he said, after a moment—and his words hissed between his tightened teeth—"yes, it is I. Still not quite sure? Look well. But were you wise to end the game so quickly, and to defy a shape you knew so little? This disguise has something else beneath it. I only meant to wave my mantle in your eyes till your wits were frothy. But you have rent my plan in two, and cut short the antics of my knaves. Your hand has suddenly spoiled my mummer's fun, snatched off my mask. Behold what lies beneath: a masquerader of a darker sort. I was only Madness; now I am Death."

And again he circled round her, nearer and nearer, extending his hands towards her,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

while she followed his every movement with horror-frozen eyes. But the end had come. As his hands were about to close round her throat, she covered her face with her own, tottered forwards, and fell. Gisla's troubles were over for ever.

With a curious smile, Ezelin gazed for some moments on the body, then threw his scarlet mantle over it.

CHAPTER XI.

TORCHLIGHT AND LIGHT.

It was perhaps consistent with the character of the Imperial Vicar that he should order Gisla the most sumptuous funeral rites; and, excommunicated though he was, he played his full part in the religious celebrations; for the priests knew well that it was as much as their lives were worth to offer the least opposition to his wishes. So Gisla was buried as befitted the wife of the greatest potentate of North Italy. What particular fever she had died of, no one cared to inquire.

She was carried in state on an open bier through the streets of Verona. The long train of chanting monks and priests and hooded penitents wound along in the twilight with innumerable torches and innumerable

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

tapers, and the lights flickered strangely on the calm, wax-like face that lay as if in sleep, and on the eyes from which the light had gone for ever. For once, the despot's orders were carried out spontaneously and with splendid sincerity. The whole city, great and small, rich and poor, soldier and citizen, man, woman, and child, turned out to do honour to her memory. The representatives of the great noble families—the San Bonifazi, the Camposampieri, the Delesmannini, the Caponegri, the Montecchi, the Capuletti—suspended their hereditary feuds to follow the bier with its magnificent fringes of gold; while Ezelin himself, in a wonderful suit of gold and black, walked by the side of the body. Guild after guild—coopers and tanners, and weavers and potters, and fullers and vintners, and armourers—followed with their apprentices and their banners. Then endless ranks of men-at-arms, and an immense crowd of women and scholars, and friars and alms-

Torchlight and Light

men, and beggars and cripples, poured into the great solemn cathedral, where she was laid to rest, and where the golden copes of the priests glinted superb in the restless lights that flashed in the gathering gloom.

And many were those who felt as if the last ray of sun in an ever-darkening world was now gone; as if the last voice of mercy were now silent for ever. But one man felt more. Lionello knelt under the great arches of the aisle, while the booming peals of the organ seemed to roll over him, wave upon wave, blending with the inner boom of his soul, that said: Lost, lost, lost.

And to think that he could have saved her; that she could at that moment have been safe and free; away, far away—if only she had consented to let herself be saved!

Ah, there was still something he could live for; there was still one thing that he could do for her; still one deed that could flash a

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

flame of excruciating joy into the darkness of his life. He could avenge her.

But every word of that ineffaceable last interview with her was printed in his soul. And had she not said, as her last earthly injunction: "Avenge me not——?"

He buried his face in his arms, as he knelt with bowed head behind the oaken back of a seat in the shadow of the great arches.

When he raised it again, the crowd that had filled the cathedral was gone. The last peals of the organ had rolled into silence. The blaze of torches and tapers had passed into darkness. The coffin in which they had placed her lay for the night lonely and solemn beneath its now shadowy pall, with only four twinkling lights at head and at foot.

Then, as his eyes rested wearily on it, he gradually became aware of a glow like that which precedes the rising of the sun—a glow which little by little increased and

Torchlight and Light

grew brighter and ever brighter. The bier, with its four twinkling tapers, faded and faded away. The arches seemed to crumble into air, and the heavens seemed to open before him. The innumerable hosts were gathered together for the reception of Gisla's spirit. As far as the eye could reach, there stretched serried legions of white-winged shapes—company on company, rank upon rank; uncountable as the leaves of the forest; standing in front of all the glories of the sunrise; while an immense fan of light grew every moment more dazzling. Presently a procession leading Gisla, robed in white and with an aureole of vaporous gold, wound slowly through their midst, till it reached the front ranks of the heavenly hosts and seemed to be quite close. Then it appeared to him that, as she passed, she turned her head and fixed upon him a look of unspeakable tenderness. And he knew that a saint had ascended to God.



III.

Selvaggia.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MISTRESS OF THE LEOPARDS.

WHILE the events related in the last few chapters were taking place, Hermann, the young Swabian soldier, had been sent by Ezelin to Sicily, to organise fresh Saracen levies for service in Lombardy.

It was Frederick's best recruiting-ground; for, after a victorious struggle with his Sicilian Saracen subjects, who had mostly retreated to the mountainous parts of the island, the Emperor had formed a large number of them into military colonies, which now furnished him trusty Mahometan troops that he could employ in every part of his Christian dominions. Against Christian enemies, they formed a terrible weapon in hands like his. They alone were deaf to the voice

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

of seduction. On them alone interdict and commination were wasted. Their faith and their language alike made appeal to their mercy impossible. Guarded by Saracen bowmen, waited on by Saracen pages, sung to by Saracen poets, edified by Saracen sages, and amused by Saracen dancing-girls, the excommunicated Emperor had crowned himself Christian King of Jerusalem in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Moslems formed the most reliable part of his armies. In every corner of his empire he employed them: in Sicily, in Apulia, in Lombardy, in Germany, in his kingdom of Burgundy. They could be met resting beneath the firs of Thuringia as well as beneath the palms of Trinacria, or bathing their horses in the Rhine as well as in the yellower Tiber. And the Emperor, in placing many of them under Ezelin, had given them as a leader the strongest captain of his age.

Under one pretext or another, Hermann's

The Mistress of the Leopards

recruiting mission in Sicily, which was to have occupied at most a few weeks, was extended to months; and among the gossip-loving attendants of the palace at Palermo, his name became associated with a scandal which, if it did not reach the ears of Frederick himself, who was far away in his German dominions, was yet hushed up with some difficulty.

There could be no question of marriage between Selvaggia, the Emperor's daughter—albeit only by a Syrian slave—and Hermann, the leader of a small troop of horse, and younger son of a mere burgrave, a mere robber noble, of the Black Forest. Her father was well known to have in view some far higher union; and had the young soldier's presumptuous folly got to his knowledge, it would probably have cost him his life.

Hermann had heard of the Emperor's wonderful daughter; of the power she exerted not only over her father, but over all with

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

whom she came into contact; of the strangeness of her ways and appearance; of her whims that were as wild as her name. But he had not expected to meet her at once. And oh, the beauty of her; oh, the marvel of her!

It was two days after his arrival in Sicily. He was strolling in the gardens of Frederick's summer villa, when he suddenly came upon her at the turn of a path. She was holding two leopards in leash with her strong naked arms, followed by an Arab boy holding a third, and came bounding along with them as they bounded down the slope, strong and supple as a leopardess herself. Her dress was a mixture of the Eastern and Western, a flash of gaudy colour and twinkling gold coins, the oriental decidedly predominating. But what more than anything held his eyes riveted, was the extraordinary discrepancy between her bright blond hair and her olive complexion and great, black, Syrian eyes.

The Mistress of the Leopards

She stopped short and fastened them upon him with a frank open stare that seemed to take in every inch of him.

"You are the Swabian that Ezelin of Padua has sent us?" she said in fairly fluent German. Her father had had her taught all the tongues that were used at his Court.

"If you have never seen any hunting with leopards, we can show you something new," she went on, when he had answered her question. "They were given to my father by the Soldan of Egypt, or rather they are the descendants of those that were given to him, when he went to the Crusade." And as she spoke, she made one of the lithe spotted creatures rise and set its paws on her shoulders, and then bent the whip she held into a circle, and made the other one leap through it.

"I have tamed them pretty thoroughly," she said; and as he expressed some surprise at her feeling no fear of them: "I love all

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

wild creatures," she went on, "and most of all those that other people fear. Look at these."

She drew out a couple of snakes that coiled round her hand, and fondled them with the other.

"I have a whole snake-house," she said. "The Saracen soldiers know I love to collect them, and bring me every snake they can find. The Saracen bowmen are my great friends. I am their real captain," she added, laughing, "and they know it."

Hermann had never seen anything like her; and when she had passed on her way, he still remained looking after her, wondering and enthralled.

In the weeks that followed, she invited him to join her and her Saracen attendants in the chase in the wild wooded valley of Abara, when the well-trained leopards, relieved of their leather hoods in sight of the unsuspecting deer—Frederick had imported them

The Mistress of the Leopards

too—would creep from ridge to ridge, from bush to bush, with infinite stealth, till, having got within striking distance, they would suddenly bound like bounding balls over the ground, and leaping on the back of the nearest, would fasten their fangs in its neck. Then he would accompany her in her hawking expeditions, where he learned new refinements of the sport, that were unknown in his own country. Nor was he left out of the games which she shared with her father's Saracen guards, and in which she showed a strength and agility that were new to him in her sex. He was strong and athletic himself, and an adept at the chivalrous sports of the West; and he took to those of the East—especially to one not unlike modern polo—with a zest that soon made him a favourite.

So what wonder if Hermann's mission in Sicily took longer to perform than any would have anticipated, and if he deferred his return to Lombardy on ever newer pretexts, long

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

after the recruits he had collected were ready to sail?

Nothing but the extraordinary mixture of races, of creeds, of civilisations, which found its highest expression in Frederick himself, could have produced such a being as his wild-named and wild-willed daughter. Doubtless, had she been legitimate, she would have had to be brought up more like other princesses of the West, and would have had to conform to their ways. But being what she was, the Emperor had felt himself free to treat her as he would some exotic wild animal, unlike others in name and in temper, in needs and in beauty. Had the name made the woman, or the woman made the name? None can now tell.

Like her father, she scarcely took the trouble to conceal her preference for the Mahometans round her, at least as companions; for she was a faithful daughter of the Church, in which she had been baptised.

The Mistress of the Leopards

She spoke their tongue, which had been her mother's, better than any other. Yet she was liked by all the other subjects of Frederick with whom she came in contact—Sicilians and Germans, Greeks and Calabrians, Burgundians and men of Provence. He had taken her with him on several of his journeys through his dominions—to Naples, to Genoa, to Arles, and to Spiers; and everywhere she had conquered the admiration of all, as she had wakened their wonder. And now, during the Emperor's protracted absence in his lands of the North, the liberty that Selvaggia enjoyed at all times was practically boundless, and her authority over the attendants and guards of the palace complete.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE AMULET.

ONE day, as the young Swabian was passing the empty paved moat in which the leopards were kept, he stopped and watched them as they paced majestically backwards and forwards. A number of iron rings were built into the wall, by which a man could let himself up or down, but which afforded the beasts themselves no means of escape. As he stood and looked, his eye was caught by something that glittered on the flags of the moat; and he recognised an emerald amulet, fastened to a chain of gold, which he had noticed round the neck of Selvaggia. She had dropped it, he thought; and without giving himself time to think further, he leaped down by the rings. Before he could pick it up, two of the

The Amulet

leopards were at his throat. He was fortunately standing with his back to a corner, and defended himself desperately with his dagger. One of the beasts rolled back, and lay writhing on the flags; but the third, that had so far taken no part in the attack, immediately took its place, and he felt that he would soon be overpowered. At that moment some one leaped down to his rescue. It was Selvaggia. She struck at the leopards with a whip, which, more dreaded than his dagger, soon brought them cringing to her feet. Her eyes, as she looked at him, were scarcely less angry than those of the leopards.

"Who gave you leave to enter the leopard moat?" she said. "See what you have done"—and she pointed to the beast he had struck, where it lay writhing its last against the wall.

"Why do you drop your gewgaws in such a place?" he retorted, handing her the trinket.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Are you badly hurt?" she asked, still frowning and wrathful.

"Not seriously," he answered. But the blood was flowing freely from his arm and his shoulder.

She unwound the white sash that she wore round her waist, ripped up his sleeve with the dagger, and then silently began to bind his wound. He wondered afterwards at the decision and dexterity with which she had done it. Then she drew forth a key, unlocked a small iron door in the wall of the moat, and led the way out by a narrow corkscrew stair; and they walked back in silence towards the palace. From that day he was hers and she was his.

But the jagged bites he had received proved more serious than he had thought. A sharp attack of fever came on, and he lay helpless for days. Then she came to him with her Arab leech, and taking control of his sick-room, nursed him through the

The Amulet

illness with the same disregard of opinion that seemed to mark all her actions. And creeping through his dreams, there would come strange wild Arab and Sicilian airs, like subdued echoes of stormy sea-caves and wind-tormented waters, as she sat and softly crooned her songs to the low tinkle of some oriental stringed instrument, and in words that he could not understand.

Then, while she thought he still slept, he would watch her at his ease in her beauty through his half-closed eyelids. Oh, she was wonderful. He had never seen anything like her—not in the North, not in the South. Her blond hair was utterly unlike the pale, tintless tresses of the girls of his country. It was warm, as if the sun had entered into it; and there were locks of it that almost glowed into auburn. And her skin had the colour of old ivory, with shadows that darkened into olive, and that matched with the long dark lashes of her great Syrian

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

eyes. But her mouth—was it cruel, or was it merely strong and determined?

Once, as she was so sitting by his bedside, his eyes rested on the strange Eastern amulet—a large dark emerald—that hung round her neck, and that had been the cause of his late misadventure and of his illness. He took it in his hand and examined it; but he could make nothing of the signs that were engraved on the stone.

“In a way, it was well that it was you who saw it in the leopard moat,” she said; “for I prize it above all gems.”

And then she told him that it had been given to her father in Syria, years before, by the head of the terrible sect of the Assassins, together with a young Syrian slave trained in all the arts of secret murder. “Show him but this amulet, which bears the sign of our sect,” the Sheik had said in his missive to the Emperor, “and he will rid thee at any time of whatsoever life may give

The Amulet

thee umbrage. Nor, if caught, will any tortures wrest the secret from his lips."

"And has your father ever put it to the test?" Hermann asked.

"No," she answered; "secret murder is not to his taste; so he made me a present of the stone."

"And what became of the Syrian slave?" he asked further.

"He became one of my father's Moslem body-guard."

"And is he still living?"

"Yes. But only my father and myself know his identity."

"And so you keep the amulet?" said Hermann, looking at it closely again.

"I don't think I shall ever have occasion to use it," Selvaggia replied, while a curious, meditative smile passed like a shadow across her resolute mouth; "but I enjoy the sense of power over human life that it gives me; and so I always wear it."

CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE SICILIAN SEA.

WHEN he was almost well again, and could walk in the air and the sunshine, they kept their love no secret from each other.

They wandered freely together where the shattered columns of old grey temples—all that remained of a sunny Greek civilisation of which they knew nothing—crowned the heights above the lazy lapping waves of the tideless Sicilian sea. They would sit for whole hours where the air was full of the scent of lemon and myrtle, or under old almond trees, leafless, but covered with blossoms that sprinkled the ground like rosy snow-flakes, and watch the white sails of the far feluccas, or follow the path of some galley-of-war, whose oars in long rows

By the Sicilian Sea

struck the wave in monotonous rhythm. The distant headlands looked faint and dreamy and unsubstantial, and the sparkling sea broke, gurgling, among the rocks at their feet—as it had broken at the feet of other lovers who had sat there fifteen centuries before, when those shattered columns had been white in their newness, and the temples had been wreathed with the garlands of youth. And the eternal waves said to them what they had said to the dead and forgotten; and the fickle winds sang to them what they had sung to the fair and the nameless; and they stretched forth their hands, and saw but the sea and the sun.

And they knew not the deity to whom those temple columns had been raised, nor had they heard of the men who had worshipped at her shrine. And yet perhaps Selvaggia, as she bent over the waves in her strength and her splendour, was no

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

inadequate image of the strong, irresistible goddess; while he who sat at her feet might have figured some stalwart young northern Adonis that an immortal love had enthralled.

Their eyes, probing the depths of living sapphire, would watch the restless sea-weeds that seemed to coil and uncoil like innumerable blue snakes upon a bed of bright blue flames, and the luminous mosses that trembled like blue stars ceaselessly towards the surface that they never, never reached. And down there, in the palaces of Ocean, they would fancy that they saw faces as of glancing mermen—even as the lovers of older days had seen passing tritons and the scaly children of Poseidon.

And again she would sing those wild songs that she had murmured by his bedside like faint echoes of Æolian harps. But now she flung them upon the air in bursts of weird music, to the accompaniment of the breaking wave,—songs so passionate

By the Sicilian Sea

and elemental that they seemed the cry of these same radiant waters when churned by the storm into madness. Or they might have been such wailings as spirits imprisoned in old sea-caves might utter to their hollow walls, or that the ghosts of shipwrecked crews might send forth from the rocks where they had perished. Or again they would suggest some mighty, earthly passion—rage, love, jealousy, ambition, or revenge—till the fury seemed to wear itself out, and the soul of the listener seemed to sail out of the tempest into bright and peaceful waters, like those that lay before them scarcely rippled by the breezes of summer, and breaking only in long, unfurling waves among the rocks at their feet.

“There are no such breezes as these in your cold, northern land,” said Selvaggia one day—“no palm and no olive, no almond, no myrtle. It is all under snow.”

“Yet, if it were not for you,” he answered

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

dreamily, "I should say: Would I were there! A month ago I should have said that I had left my heart in the old Swabian forest."

She looked up quickly. "Your heart?" she said uneasily.

"It is no human love," he answered, with a smile. "But, oh! the beauty of the black Swabian fir woods, with the resin trickling down the rugged, old, moss-grown stems, and scenting the breeze like a myrrh of the mountains!—where the loosened snow thunders down the chasms at the call of the spring, and the forest wild-flowers peep up from under it at the first rays of April!"

And then he told her of the black mountain home of his fathers, an eagle's nest on the gaping abyss, where tower and rock were so welded together that you scarcely could tell when they met. And of the drawbridge that spanned the giddy precipice from rock to rock; and of the winds that howled their war-song round the battlements in winter;

By the Sicilian Sea

and of the sieges it had stood; and of the chase of the wolf and the bear; and how his sisters sat spinning at the narrow turret window with the maids of the castle, and wove all the snowy-white linen, while his brothers caroused in the hall, where the wolf-spears were ranged on the walls, and where the banners hung down from the beams of black oak.

"I never could love it," Selvaggia said, with a shiver: "I belong to the South and the sun." And she bared her throat to the scent-laden breezes that fanned her, and looked out on the dazzling horizon.

"That is because you don't know it," he answered. "There is nothing so glorious as the black fir forest and the deep needle litter."

"How can you say it," she said, looking down into his face—"you who have the blue of this sea in your eyes?"

He brushed away the blond locks from his

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

forehead, and looked again at the white sails in the offing.

“There is endless wonder in this sea,” he said slowly; “but only because you shine upon it.”

CHAPTER XV.

CROWNS AND SCEPTRES.

THEY threw themselves headlong into the perilous intrigue, meeting often by night in the gardens of the imperial villa. Selvaggia risked all and gave all. Yet it was only one-half of her nature that yielded: for there were two women in her—the woman of passion and the woman of ambition; and these two halves of herself kept up a continual war. There were times when she would suddenly seem to awake to all that was anomalous in her position.

“Are you not Frederick’s daughter?” said Constance, her Sicilian tire-woman and confidante, who reluctantly helped her in her clandestine meetings with Hermann, while dreaming of some splendid marriage for her,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

which should increase her own power and importance.

"Yes, I am indeed his daughter," Selvaggia answered bitterly—"his daughter with all the imperial instincts of his race, and all her mother's shame; brought up as wild as a young panther, bowed to with ill grace as Frederick's pet, and scorned by great and small as Frederick's bastard, who usurps the place of others; the unfortunate whom a wall of shame surrounds, and in whose veins flows the blood of two great races that call each other cursed. . . ."

"They say that Ezelin's wife is dead."

"What has that to do with me?" asked Selvaggia, raising her eyebrows.

"Ezelin has grown in your father's favour of late as none has yet," went on Constance. "The Paduan is as great in power and fame as many a full-crowned monarch. As the Emperor's Vicar in North Italy, he ranks almost as a king. They used to say——"

Crowns and Sceptres

She hesitated.

"What used they to say?" asked Selvaggia.

"It may have been but idle gossip," Constance continued; "but the gust of rumour often blows true. The people said—since you *will* have it—that if only his wife Gisla had been dead, Ezelin would have asked your father for your hand."

"A foolish rumour," said Selvaggia.

"Not so foolish. You can never command royal rank: your birth precludes. But Ezelin, although uncrowned, yet stands among the great of the earth."

"I fear, indeed, that my father has thoughts of marriage for me. You that know my heart's inmost secrets, can judge with what terror I think of it. At best he'd choose some passing favourite. I doubt your gossip. Ezelin has other things to think of than a new marriage."

"A marriage with you, the Emperor's

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

daughter, would help him to carry out his daring schemes. There is no captain like him. He is one of those that carve out kingdoms for themselves. He has not his match in Italy. His fame grows year by year, even as his dominions extend."

"But what are his victories and fame to me—to me who love Hermann?"

"You know you can never marry Hermann," Constance answered; "and Frederick will compel your marriage with another."

"That were death."

"No," went on the tire-woman: "you are too ambitious for that. For the moment you heed but what your passion prompts, and you think only of the Swabian. It is a perilous love, born but of whim. You are not the woman to wreck your life for what, at best, is but a fleeting passion. Hermann is here only on a passing mission; and as a flower on a stream floats out of sight, so will he drift out of your life and out of your thought,

Crowns and Sceptres

and be but a one-day's dream. I fain would see this fruitless fancy ended."

"Ay, you are right," answered Selvaggia musingly. "I *am* ambitious; and till he and I met here in Sicily, I fretted day and night that I could not be a queen and mate with sons of kings."

"And who has it in his power to satisfy that craving, save one alone—the great Ezelin? He can place you on what is almost a throne, and soon may be one quite. A realm has grown, as city upon city in the plain of Lombardy has trembled and thrown open its gates. The provinces that he rules, ostensibly in your father's name, are among the fairest states of Italy, and are virtually his own."

"Is he not dire?" asked Selvaggia.

"What lord of men is not?" answered the other. "Great power creates dreadful necessities. Is Frederick, your own father, not dire enough? Does his power not rest on others' fear? War is made by fire and

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

sword, not by the tinkle of a lute; and those who take great cities must hold them as they took them. But many a ruler, in whose shadow men have cowered, has obeyed a woman's word, and tamely borne her yoke. And then——”

“And then?”

“There's this consideration,” Constance proceeded; “if you were to marry the Paduan, you might meet Hermann again; your only chance of ever seeing him. Is he not in his service?”

“A strange thread to hang a hope on,” answered Selvaggia, “but one that would serve love and ambition equally. I have set my soul upon the Swabian.”

“Even if his rank were equal to yours,” went on Constance, “could Hermann endow your life as can Ezelin? He takes the lead of all in Italy. There is a star that bears him on to victory; and every scheme on which he embarks makes for success.”

Crowns and Sceptres

Selvaggia seemed to weigh the other's words, for she was long in answering. At length, raising her head—"Were I to hearken to ambition alone," she said, "it would bid me marry a man like Ezelin, whom great stars mark, no doubt, for mighty things. But, as I've said, Love is too strong and masterful. My father's northern blood would bid me to be worldly, and to marry the great Paduan. But the fiery torrent which my Syrian mother poured into my veins, sweeps such cold schemes away. Which mood will win the day, I know not."

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE MOONLIT GARDEN.

AND so, when the day for the Swabian's long-deferred departure finally came, Selvaggia was more than ever conscious of the two currents that were fighting for mastery in her soul. Two apparently incompatible feelings possessed her, perhaps not absolutely at the same moment, but in such rapid succession and alternation as to be practically co-existent. Was she already half-weary of the love that she had satisfied; had the flame in its violence already half-burned itself out; or had it never entirely and exclusively mastered her? This much is certain, that, while she felt a tightening of the heart and a yearning for the sight of him, she yet felt a sort of vague relief at the thought of the safety and

In the Moonlit Garden

freedom that would follow his departure, at the thought that she would once more be at liberty to give rein to the cravings that he never could satisfy.

He and she were to meet for the last time in the moonlit garden which had first been the scene of their embraces. It was well, Selvaggia thought, as she waited for him, that that last night should be so fair. It would be embalmed in her soul in all the spices with which the air was laden; and memory's pearly shrine would keep it whole in its enchantment. Love for the moment was winning in her breast, and all around her appealed to her senses. The moon was floating up like a silvery bubble through the vast seas of blue. The pebbles, as they lay in her light, were transmuted into gems. The sleeping flowers were closed, as if laid by like half-extinguished censers, breathing faint incense. On the night's pale brow—save near the moon—there shone starry diadems above

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the cypresses, constellation on constellation. From some dark bough a nightingale was shaking down a flood of song, boundlessly lavish. The fountains, from the stone basins where they tossed, leaped moonwards in the passion of their love, and seemed to fall back sobbing. Oh, why was he so long in coming? What made him late, with such a moon above, he that must leave at dawn? Had he forgotten the value of the hours, that he should prove faithless to their tryst? Why did he delay, to-night of all nights? To-morrow's moon would flood an empty garden. Only lifeless shadows would fall upon that spot, and the fountains and the nightingales would waste their sobs on empty space.

Were they indeed about to part, and for ever? The drop of rain that meets another in the bosom of a yellow rose, becomes with it as one; and vainly the wind would make them two once more. Each goes its way among the petals; they are two but for a

In the Moonlit Garden

while, and then again they close. Ay, but what of the petals that the wild wind blows asunder? What breeze will blow them back where they grew? No; fate was all against them.

At last she heard his step.

"I am late, I know it," he said, panting. "Chance placed obstructions in my path. I could not escape suspicious eyes, and there were feet that dogged me."

"I knew," she answered, "that it could not be the wings of love that flagged. But, oh! we meet for the last time to-night."

He fixed a searching look upon her face.

"It need not be," he said.

Selvaggia started. "I don't understand," she answered.

"Selvaggia, listen. There are times when prudence must be flung upon the winds; when desperate plans insist on action, then and there, and sweep our souls away like a wave. To-night you'll not be missed. Sel-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

vaggia, will you save our love by flight? Will you trust all to me, and brave your father's wrath?"

She drew herself back.

"It cannot be," she said, rather coldly. "It would mean your death and mine. It cannot be. Even if his fury spared us for a while, you could but drag me on your random path from camp to camp as your minion; and however wild the impulses that spur her, the daughter of Frederick will never stoop to that."

"No, no; I will take you away, far away, to the black Swabian forest; to the eagle's nest which even Frederick could never scale, Emperor though he is. Oh, it has stood many a siege, and will stand many a one yet. And there you would be safe."

"It cannot be," she repeated. "It is useless to try and persuade me."

"Was it to part," he cried out bitterly—"to part perhaps for ever; to clasp each

In the Moonlit Garden

other wildly and then sever our lives, stretching vague hands into the dark, that we have braved such risks?"

"I did not say for ever," she answered. "We may yet meet again. The stars above are fixed. . . ." And as he again endeavoured to persuade her—"Love, do not try to shake my purpose," she said. "Though you were to pile persuasion on persuasion heaven high, you could not change my decision. Whatever may lie beneath the sealed-down lid of fate, this much stands fast for Heaven and us, as long as Life has breath and Love has wings—that Hermann and Selvaggia . . ."

She did not finish the sentence. A sound of approaching steps and voices broke the solitude of the garden.

"Through here!" she cried, "through here! —you have but time to fly; . . . 'tis death if we be found! . . . Leave me! Leave me! . . . One moment more, and it will be too late. . . . Through here! Through here!"

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

And she pushed him through a small hidden door in the wall. And he was gone.

Selvaggia leaned panting against the column of the summer-house that had sheltered their loves.

Ay, he was gone. Was it the end—the end of all? A dream; a flutter round a perilous abyss; a pang; an empty garden and a sob?

Above her the stars twinkled inscrutably.

IV.

Adalhita.



CHAPTER XVII.

TRAMP OF HORSE.

MEANWHILE, in the shadow of the Eastern Alps, Ezelin was proceeding from success to success, from victory to victory. His latest feat of arms had been the capture and sack of Feltre; and the people of Padua had gathered in dense crowds to see him and his soldiery return in triumph, and with new terror added to his name.

The day was coming to a close, and from the darkening sky was heard, every now and then, a sound of approaching thunder.

Lost in the crowd, Fra Luca was listening to the remarks and fragments of conversation of the artisans and peasants, who, close packed and craning their heads, stood on tiptoe all about him. He did not often enter the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

haunts of men, preferring the desert of stone and scrub, where his visions, born perhaps of sun and glare, of thirst and solitary maceration, came to him in greatest frequency; but an irresistible impulse to see Ezelin again had drawn him into the city.

"Stand on this step," a tanner was saying to one of his mates, "and you'll see him. He'll ride by in a few moments now. Can you see, out there, the turbans of his Moslem cavalry — their scimitars and champing horses? They say he has sent to Sicily for more. Look: that's Ibrahim, their captain. They say he's Ezelin's favourite. He has raised him to be the chief of all his Saracens. It's thanks to him that he has taken Feltre."

"How their horses champ and rear!" said a weaver.

"They've wonderful blades. They're the very finest in the world," said an armourer, with the air of a connoisseur.

"That he should use such turbaned mis-

Tramp of Horse

creants in a Christian country," said another tanner. "They adore the devil every one."

"Hush!" whispered the weaver; "do you wish to taste the rack? Here come the tow-haired Swabians. Each troop flaunts a different pennant—see."

A peasant was standing open mouthed.

"What countless swords!" he murmured; "squadron on squadron; hoofs enough to trample all the cornfields of the world."

"If they've left a field to trample," answered another by his side.

"Be more cautious," whispered a friar. "Speak lower. We'll see him very soon, . . . Antichrist."

"A storm is at hand," remarked the armourer, who had already spoken. "How dark the sky is growing! And now another peal of thunder. . . . Listen. What endless ranks of bowmen! Can you see?"

"At least we make their arrows," said an arrowsmith.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Who will free the cities from his clutches," asked the weaver, "now that he's flush with this great sack? . . . Surely that's he?"

"No, not he," answered the tanner, "one of his cursed captains."

"Lower . . . hush," whispered the armourer; "his spies are everywhere."

"His power grows more awful every day," said a cooper. "And now he'll crush city after city, and treat them worse than those he has taken. At Mantua he gave no quarter to man, woman, or child."

"How long, O Lord, how long?" murmured Fra Luca.

"Do you think he'll have his hunchback jester with him?" went on the weaver; "many say he makes him plan quaint tortures. He's a knave of wonderful invention; and the day his cunning fails, and he can invent nothing new, he'll be racked himself."

A peasant woman was looking on darkly and sullenly.

Tramp of Horse

"What times, what times!" she muttered.

"Ay, they're full of fright for us poor women," answered another. "A woman gave birth to a child with a dog's head in my village the other day. It barked as soon as it was born."

"Woe, woe to Padua," cried the Hermit of the Stony Holes.

"A baleful lord," said a vintner. "They say he reads the stars before each battle. That's how he conquers. And we know that he does miracles. One day, as he was besieging a castle, and his men were stopped by the moat, he bade it ebb away, shrink, and diminish. And, lo! the water shrank. His soldiers passed, and the place was stormed."

"Last year," said a cooper, "I heard it said that when his steed was killed, and lay stiff and stark dead, he struck it on the brow with his sword; and though it was dead, it struggled up, neighed wildly, and bore him on to victory,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

Who can make head against such power as that?"

"Ay, ay, that's it," rejoined the arrowsmith; "his power would never have grown as it has, if it had been merely human."

"All admit," said the vintner, "that he's God's outcast and man's enemy, and that so long as the Devil gives him power, there is woe in store for men. You've never seen him?"

"No," said the weaver.

"Well, you'll see him now. But the clouds lower. It's growing very dark. You can scarcely see the faces. How the thunder growls! We've been waiting for an hour, and still he hasn't passed. And more and more troops of horse."

At that point, a long murmur, like that of a great wave unfurling, ran along the street.

"It's he! It's he!" cried the vintner. "God, what a flash! Did you see him in the van of that last troop?"

Tramp of Horse

"No," answered the weaver. "In the flash of lightning, I saw only a small pale man on a black horse."

"That was Ezelin," said the other.

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That night, Fra Luca had again the vision of Death and Sin playing at dice; only this time he saw a colourless and lifeless sea, above which was a sky equally livid. Across that sky, darker clouds, which kept changing shape, rolled slowly, and presently condensed into two shadowy figures, vague and colossal, seated opposite to each other, whose voices came over the lifeless waves muffled and unearthly, as if from a great distance.

"Now for another game," said Sin. "But dost thou think that Fate will give thee up to-day the soul for which we toss? He shall yet drink the cup of human greatness. I play with dice that Fate has loaded."

"Boast not yet, Mother Sin," answered Death. "Fate cannot long delay the last

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

great throw. Fresh perils beset him, and my hour must come soon. Earth will not let her plains be made too hell-like. Soon his power, built on fear, will fall through fear. I creep about him in his battles. In his tower, raised on dungeons, sleepless eyes watch him, and daggers wait him. His food is spiced with my own spices."

"He has stood unshaken in worse perils," said Sin. "Many a land has still to call him lord. A crown waits him. Now shake the dice."

"Nay, throw thou first," answered Death.

Then Sin raised the dice and threw.

"A five and a four!" she cried.

Death threw in his turn.

"A five and a three," he said. "Mother, thou hast won. Thou mayst have him yet a little while."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE SARACENS.

CAN the very evil inspire affection in any but in her who brought them into the world, and who may be supposed to feel the same love for them as the wolf feels for its whelp, the vulture for its little one? It is a curious question, which must, I think, be answered in the affirmative. History certainly affords instances of very strange devotions towards those who, in their own day, inspired nothing but fear in the souls of men in general, and for whom posterity has nothing but horror; and indeed it would be strange if the partialities of a Caligula or a Nero for a slave, for a minion, should have remained utterly unrequited. But the case of Ezelin was some-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

what different. Barring his attachment to Adalhita, which was, so to speak, part of his shadowy worship, and which was born of a community of soul—albeit in the realm of crime and of madness—Ezelin had no loves. His icy being was incapable even of the attractions of mere sensual nature; but it was not incapable of a certain sort of liking for those who served him well. He was generous towards his instruments; nay, he had often incurred the imputation of favouritism, and aroused bitter jealousies among them. He would now and then astonish his army by the promotion of this or that subordinate, whose abilities he recognised, or whose courage he admired; and while he was inexorable and indescribably cruel where he believed himself to be ill served, he was as lavish of rewards as any captain of his age. Of all his motley troops, the Saracens were his favourites; he could trust them where he could trust no others; and of all his Saracens there was one

The Captain of the Saracens

whom he most trusted, one whom he most valued.

Ibrahim had entered his service very young, had been attached to his person for some years as captain of the Moslem guard which watched over his safety, and had recently been made chief of all his Saracens. He belonged to a military class that has always existed in times and countries where Christian and Mahometan serve under one master. He was familiar with European customs; he had been trained in the daily companionship of Christian soldiers; he had shared their sports and fought by their side, and he spoke more than one of their languages fluently. He was bound to Ezelin by many a favour, and he felt a limitless admiration for the captain who had formed him as a soldier, whom he believed to be invincible, and whose acts it was not his business to judge. His devotion to the despot was like that of the dog to his master, and was born of daily and hourly contact, of daily

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

and hourly obedience. We call it love in the dog, and must equally call it love in the man.

And so Ibrahim loved his terrible chief—loved him in his own oriental way, with his own oriental soul, that no familiarity with Western men and manners and tongues could make at bottom less oriental. The soul of a Moslem like Ibrahim is as one of those pungent scents of the East that may be enclosed for a while in some casket of Western make; but born of fierce Eastern suns, it never changes its nature: it resists the weakening action of years, and never entirely evaporates. However long after, if the casket be suddenly opened or violently broken, the spirit of the East is let loose—a spirit that the European may make use of, but will never be able to analyse or understand.

The Arab cavalry that trampled the plains of Italy in the thirteenth century left no more trace than the shadows of their horses; but while they were there, the nature they had

The Captain of the Saracens

brought with them, however close their contact with the West, was present in all its force—the mystery, the treachery, the revenge, the love, the blind fidelity, the unreasoning obedience.

CHAPTER XIX.

IBRAHIM'S NIGHT RIDE.

THE Imperial Vicar's tyranny, against which open revolt had failed, bred plot upon plot against his life. As each unsuccessful attempt was drowned in blood, and as the number of those who had a son or a brother to avenge increased, the conspiracies grew more and more desperate. The latest of these plots was conceived by the father and brothers of the lad Egidio, whose life Gisla had obliged Lionello to save at the price of her own, but whom Ezelin had recaptured and put to a terrible death. How far the threads of the conspiracy reached was never known; but the plotters had certainly friends in the palace, and helpers among his Italian officers. The idea was to surprise him in his sleep. The first thing to

Ibrahim's Night Ride

do was to get Ibrahim out of the way. He guarded Ezelin, and they knew him to be incorruptible. They seized a moment when the despot was known to be most unwilling to interrupt his study of the stars, and suddenly informed him that a garrison had mutinied at Castelnovo, some thirty miles away. They arranged that every officer that he might have sent should be unavailable, save Ibrahim; and so the Saracen was despatched with a troop of his dusky horsemen.

He rode hard and long. When he reached Castelnovo, there was no trace of a mutiny. All was quiet as usual. Surprised, half-pleased, at the tranquillity, half-wrathful at his unnecessary ride, Ibrahim encamped his troop outside the little town, and accepted the hospitality of the captain of the small Lombard garrison; then, fatigued by his long ride, he went early to rest.

He had scarcely been an hour asleep when a murmur of voices crept through his dreams.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

Two men were talking outside. A word made him start up and lean on his elbow, listening intently. "By dawn," said one of the voices, "Ezelin will be dead, and the shadow that darkens men's lives will have passed away for ever. Nothing can save him, now that we have Ibrahim here."

The Saracen slipped off his bed and listened closer; and soon he had grasped the whole plot. Ezelin was to be struck in his sleep.

There were still three hours before the blow would fall—barely time for a horse to do the distance. There was no time to awake his Saracens, who were encamped on the other side of the town. Would it be possible for his Arab mare—Ezelin's most precious gift—already jaded by a long day's ride through the heat?

Ibrahim crept to the door; he was locked in. But there was a window through which he might perhaps escape. Unrolling his long Eastern sash, he silently let himself down,

Ibrahim's Night Ride

glided to the spot where his mare was tethered, saddled her, and rode away unseen in the darkness.

And now it was a race against time, a race on the finest horse in the world, but a horse that had already done what would have worn out any other. He had no doubt of her powers.

And on and on through the night he galloped—past the cypresses standing like sentries of the dead; past the olive trees, grey and ghostly; past the vineyards that the stars scarcely lighted.

And now the moon rose, and Ibrahim's shadow and that of his sorely spurred horse galloped beside and in front of him. Perhaps two other shadowy riders joined in the race, too faint for him to see, but deciding between them the fate of his ride. If so, Death must have whispered dim words of discouragement, that blent with the sound of the wind, and Sin must have urged him with ever wilder

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

exulting to save the life that was threatened, and have been by his side at the finish. He knew his road well; and he knew that it was a question of minutes. He suspected from what he had overheard that the bridge across the Adige was held by the conspirators, and without an instant's hesitation he determined to cross the great flooded stream where he knew the opposite bank to be shelving. It was a desperate venture. The water swirled in icy, shadowy circles around him, and he saw himself and his brave mare swept down helplessly farther and farther from the spot where he had thought to land. And the shadow that now swam by his side was Death. At last the mare touched ground; and then again he galloped on ceaselessly, mercilessly, Sin keeping pace by his side, till the horse fell beneath him. He had killed her; but he had done what he had set out to do.

All was hushed in the sleeping city. He gathered up a watch of his Saracens at one

Ibrahim's Night Ride

of the gates and entered the palace, which he found strangely ill-guarded. Two men who had been on duty outside Ezelin's rooms had already been cut down, but the conspirators were still crouching in an anteroom, and were caught as in a trap. The despot himself was asleep, unconscious of his peril.

Ibrahim had saved his master.

Then the Imperial Vicar, alone and unarmed, entered the room where the plotters were hidden, and were waiting for the signal to fall upon him. They had been ready to kill Ezelin in his sleep. But Ezelin, standing before them sudden and silent, with his cold, ironical smile of security, froze them to stone. As if in the presence of the superhuman, they stared at him, mouths fallen and eyes starting—dumb.

“To the tormentors,” he said.

CHAPTER XX.

MAGIC MAIL.

THIS incident left little impression on Ezelin's mind. At most, it confirmed his confidence in Ibrahim's fidelity. It also perhaps strengthened his fatalistic belief in his own supernatural destiny, and in the protection of the great dark power to whom his existence was devoted. As each attempt on his life broke like a vain wave against him, and left no trace, he dismissed it from his mind as soon as he had executed the conspirators; for he was physically fearless, and he had never been actually struck.

But these attempts had a different effect on the mind of Adalhita. She had never felt that her son's superhuman origin, great as might be its promise, in any way shielded him from

Magic Mail

the ordinary perils of humanity; and the plots against his life filled her with a brooding anxiety. Hitherto she had sought to protect him by consulting the stars and by other occult means, which should enable her to anticipate the hours of danger and warn him of any threatening evil. But now she turned to more practical precautions. He scorned to protect himself by wearing a shirt of mail, as did other tyrants; but she believed she could bring him to do so, if only for her sake; and she turned all her thoughts to the making of a chain corselet that should be of incomparable lightness and impenetrable strength, while wrought darkly in the name of Ezelin's protecting power.

So, day by day, she crouched in the dark workshop, a weird and hooded figure, behind the old armourer—the most famous of his day—as he bent over the corselet with his tweezers, adding, with infinite patience, link after link to the wonderful woof; working out the design

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

she had given him; knitting the tiny rings into magical letters whose meaning he did not understand, while she muttered equally unintelligible words, or chanted a low, rhythmical incantation. He could not see her behind him; but he felt her evil shadow wrapping him round, her baleful influence dominating his labour. The old man trembled as he worked. The cold sweat broke on his brow. His fingers shook. The corselet seemed to quiver and writhe beneath them. "It is living," he thought in his terror-stricken soul; and nothing but his yet more awful dread of disobeying the mother of Ezelin compelled him to proceed with the task. He would have probably spent each night in undoing the work over which he had spent each horrible day; but she carried it away with her every evening at dusk. When at last it was finished, never had so perfect a piece of work left an armourer's hands. Its weight was as nothing; yet the sharpest dagger driven by the strongest

Magic Mail

arm broke against it. It could be rolled into a ball that you could hold in the hollow of your hand. The very fineness and wonder of it appealed to Ezelin. He consented to wear it. Nor had Adalhita to wait long before the quality of the corselet was put to the test. One day, as he rode through the city, an unknown enemy sprang out of the shadow and struck him full in the breast. The point of the dagger snapped as though of glass. The man disappeared as suddenly and as mysteriously as he had started up, and was never caught. Ezelin had to confess that the thing had saved his life. "How could it fail to do so?" said Adalhita. "Is not his ineffable name woven into it? Wear it, my son, wear it."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CALL OF EBLIS.

INFORMED by the daily reports of his innumerable spies, he was aware of the belief that was growing among the people, that his power was not wholly human; and he would have viewed it with satisfaction, even if he had not shared it; for he saw in it an additional force; and it would in any case have been politic to affect supernatural ways as a mere means of increasing his hold on the masses. But since the extraordinary revelation which his mother had made him, which appealed to every instinct of his soul, he nursed the idea of his preterhuman descent with a daily growing rapture. The influence of Adalhita on his life, at all times abundant, was now enormously in-

The Call of Eblis

creased. He was constantly conferring with her, was continually pressing her for further revelations, and threw himself blindly into the vortex of that magic and that hashish-fed vision-seeing, that had made her what she was.

In her dimly lighted turret chamber there was an indefinable attraction born of the gloom, of the strange, narcotic scents, of the mysterious rustlings, of the unseen presences by which he believed it to be peopled, and to which she alluded without ever giving them a name. But more than all, its attraction was due to her own tremendous personality. Her room was herself—herself with all her faith, with all her evil, with all her secrets, with all her lurid, imaginative power. Her room was the portal to the Unseen, the shrine of the Unknown, the observatory of the Past and the Future, the laboratory of the Forbidden. Hers was the only soul that his soul understood, that

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

it gave itself up to, wholly and passionately. She was old, very old. But he felt that her spirit could never age. Wrinkled and hollow-cheeked she might be, but her eyes still flamed in undiminished splendour, and a baleful beauty still illumined the clear-cut features that no wrinkles could conquer, no emaciation or pallor render less perfect. The first thought was: how beautiful she must have been; the second: how beautiful she still was.

Adalhita had a knowledge of the power of light and of the means of producing optical illusions that was rare in her century among the peoples of the West, a knowledge that she had probably obtained from Syrian jugglers and magicians. There were dim and mysterious mirrors in her room, mirrors before which there stood brazen tripods, whose fumes, as they wreathed upward, gleamed with dusky fires. In these mirrors it was that she would summon the dead and the

The Call of Eblis

distant to appear darkly in scarcely seizable glimpses. But she could also produce apparitions more vivid, more startling, and more beautiful. Once, in the dark depths of the room, Ezelin had seen his mother's tall, shadowy figure suddenly become strangely luminous, her garments grow like flames of many colours, that shifted and blent and alternated in ceaseless dance and play, waving and trembling in unearthly glory, till she seemed to be of very flame herself, beautiful and infinitely terrible. The reflection of that realm whose powers she controlled, whose glory she shared, was upon her. Its splendour was wrapping her round like a mantle. He held his breath as he watched her, not daring to approach. And brighter and ever brighter, dazzling and ever more dazzling, grew the flaming phantasm, till the wondrous transfiguration reached the height of its beauty and its terror. Then it slowly faded, dying and dying away in the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

mysterious depths of the mirror, as the fires that produced it gradually sank and went out.

Ay, there could be no doubt. Adalhita was the elected handmaid of the great dark power that was his parent. She was the chosen vessel. And as he cowered at her feet, listening in that dim, demon-haunted chamber to the record of her awful visions, which she uttered with the wild eloquence of a mediæval pythoness, the belief in his own incredible incarnation grew ever more firmly rooted in his soul, and more ominous of terror for mankind.

She made him see in her dreadful ravings the great vaults of Wrath, where dwelt the Power, the darkness of whose wings men call Evil. She made him see the king of the hopeless throngs on his black basaltic throne, in the terrific, glare-illuminated caves where Michael had cast him, and where Pain's roar rises up eternally night and day.

The Call of Eblis

She made him see the great Lord of the Doomed Shadows, receiving the homage of those dreadful slaves, those terror-spreading angels of earthquake and hurricane, of flood, of plague, and of famine, whose hand flings destruction over earth and sea and air, while flame was fawning and licking his feet with all its countless tongues.

And then she showed him a spirit mightier and more subtle than any of those great wild destroyers who rush blindly through nature—a spirit who starts in silence on her errand; whom none behold, as, creeping through the gloom, she undermines, unties, and loosens all the props of built-up good, with no more sign nor sound than a black snake in the tangled grass, till, with a thunder that astonishes the world, the house of Good comes crashing down in lies—great Sin herself.

And she told Ezelin how, in her latest vision, she had heard Sin tell the sleepless

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

Lord of Evil of one on earth who would gladden his heart and fill it with a father's pride.

"My son?" Eblis had said.

"Ay, dark-souled Ezelin. There is no crime that his hand has not outdone. In every city of East Lombardy, his subterranean prisons, in which limb unlearns to bend and eye to see, conceal things whose screws would make thy own flesh creep, if flesh thou hadst. Thy son is very worthy."

"I know it," Eblis had answered. "I keep him in sight by my dark-winged slaves. I gave him at his birth a throng of evil angels as a guard. They circle about his every thought and deed."

"His hand is strong on Mercy's throat," Sin had said. "Over every inch of ground that calls him master, pain has darkened the sky and fear has eclipsed the sun."

"It is my will to see him here," Eblis had then rejoined; "to see him alive, in mortal

The Call of Eblis

clay. His mother drew me once to an earthly love. There was more evil in her single heart than would damn a world. From these red vaults of ire she drew me resistlessly. I fain would see her son in my nether realm. I would tell him that he earns his father's praise. Bring him that I may see him. Bring him down the interminable gullets of the Pit."

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Adalhita ceased. Ezelin sprang up with a great shout.

"Mother, mother," he cried, "I will go; I will go. Show me but the way, and I will go."

"Ay, you shall go," answered Adalhita. "You shall see your father. But Sin, not I, shall lead you."

CHAPTER XXII.

DESCENT TO GEHENNA.

EZELIN had at all times inspired terror. But now there was a darker light in his eyes, a something more ominous of evil in his manner. His mother's revelations had possessed his soul, and the man's whole terrible being seemed intensified. With the patience of one conscious of a superhuman destiny, he waited the summons that his mother had told him to expect. He did not hurry the hours. Each held the possibility that made him more than mortal.

One night, when storm roared round the palace, and the very elements seemed conscious of the greatness of the moment, Adalhita sent for him. He found her stooping over a strange, slowly smoking brazier,

Descent to Gehenna

engraved with cabalistic signs. Its fumes were heavy and overpowering.

"You are about to undertake a mighty journey," she said, as she stirred the smouldering embers—"one longer than any man now living has ever ventured on. But you will be back by dawn."

"Then shall I travel swiftly," he answered.

"Ay, as swiftly as in a dream."

She moved restlessly about the brazier for some time, and muttered words in a language that he could not understand. Then she bade him walk round and round it, fixing his eyes steadily upon the small blue flames that danced on the surface of the burning charcoal. When giddiness prevented his continuing to circle any longer, she made him kneel beside the brazier with his eyes still riveted upon it. Its fumes enveloped him and dulled his brain. She crooned a slow, monotonous chant. He felt his senses keeping pace with it, and presently he was

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

going round and round in an interminable descent. The glare of the brazier shrank and diminished, invaded from outside by an overpowering blackness. Slowly it became but a single point of fire, a dark star which at length flamed into a torch. And Sin, holding the torch high, was beckoning him on, with white and leering face, down interminable galleries, down endless chains of black volcanic caves.

"How dark it is!" he said. "Raise thy torch higher, Sin. I cannot keep my footing down these black lobbies of hell. I am sliding in blood."

"And were it blood, wouldst thou back?"

"Not I," he answered.

"It is the trickling, sulphurous ooze," Sin explained, "which the crater yields. It follows in the track of lava that has ebbed. These are the channels through which the red and fiery tide rolls up when the volcano wakes. Each time it flows, the lava washes

Descent to Gehenna

over the felon souls who, chained to rings in the black rock, await the fire that makes them glow like living coals, but leaves them whole to undergo their fate over and over again. Anon we shall approach them."

"I have live things under my feet," he said, "which clog my steps. What pulpy reptiles are they?"

"Never mind them," answered Sin. "They are the salamanders that the waves of ebbing fire have left. They die and rot out of their element. Their flat brood paves these rocky guts by thousands."

"When will these strangled and interminable caves come to an end—this bottomless, black descent?"

"When the red glare meets us."

He followed his shadowy guide in silence for a while. Suddenly loud and hungry roars startled the darkness.

"What are these wild beasts?" he cried.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"It sounds as when the doors of the arena cages are unbarred at the Verona games."

"No brindled pard or striped hyæna ever gnawed the bone with roars like these in thy arena wards," said Sin, as they hurried on. "The tigers that are shackled to the rock in these black straits wear human shape, and each is face to face through endless night with one as furious as himself, but just out of reach. They were wild beasts on earth, and in the darkness they make for each other. There: thou canst see the first fell couples looming as I hold up the torch. Look how they strain to slake their blood-thirst. There is barely room to pass between them. Thou wilt have to run the gauntlet. When they scent the blood with which thy soul is stained, every chain will need a second; they will all be bent on thee and thy destruction. Canst thou brace thy courage to the dread experiment?"

Descent to Gehenna

"Give me the torch," he answered, "that I may see the space. It is very scanty."

"Unless thou reach the Pit, farewell thy schemes. Thou'lt never set a crown on thy head."

"I'll venture it, so help me Satan!" he replied. And taking the torch from her, he threaded his way between the shapes. As they passed through, the roars redoubled in fury, then subsided.

"There, thou art through!" Sin cried.

"I thought they would have torn me bit by bit," he answered, panting, and pressing his hand to his side. "They almost touched my throat."

"Hurry on, hurry on," urged Sin. "Nine black chains of caverns still await us. We have wound through only half the gullets."

The descent was growing ever steeper, and the slippery ground more like a slide.

"Until thy breath is spent we may not pause," Sin continued.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Lead on: thou knowest the way," he replied. "I neither look behind me nor repent."

So on and on they hurried, until at last the red glare met them, where the gullets opened out upon the great central caverns, and they had beneath their eyes the lakes of torment, and the black rock on which sits Eblis night and day, where there is neither day nor night. Around his throne the lava lakes' red waves for ever played. Over them, now and then, some fallen angel would flit like a bird to take the master's orders. When he knitted the brow that rested on his hand, or when a mutter moved his lips, the half-hushed song of pain from all the countless, writhing souls burst out afresh. It was long, Sin told Ezelin, since Eblis had last left his seat. His folded wings, if opened, closed again; and the fell throng was still waiting the dreadful flight whose shadow would throw fresh agony upon them. Flakes of fiery ash

Descent to Gehenna

fell ceaseless, straight, and slow; and every flake stung some soul before it melted upon the lake's red, windless surface.

"Thou hast nothing to fear," said Sin. "Have I not laid upon thy brow my ice-cold kiss that makes thy limbs secure from flame? Swift wings shall bear thee over the lurid billows to the throne. Thou shalt be set down upon its steps and hear thy father's voice."

"The molten stone with its broad glare should blind me," Ezelin murmured; "yet my eyes rest upon it undestroyed. The heat thrown up by the red lakes should scorch me; yet my flesh defies the lava and its burning breath."

"It is the kiss I laid upon thy forehead," Sin repeated. "See, hither flies the bat-winged fiend who will bear thee safely over the red abyss, while I in my own ways will cross it no less quickly. Meanwhile, look upon thy father's realm, which lies

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

under thy eyes in its terrific grandeur, the lost world of dark red glare, where every shadow sways in ceaseless pain."

As his companion spoke, a rush of wings sounded above them, and Ezelin felt himself caught up and carried swiftly through the fiery air. Then he was set down by the dreadful messenger of Eblis on the steps of the throne of black basalt on which sat his father, while Sin was again by his side.

He dared not at first raise his eyes to the terrific presence.

"O thou," said Sin, "whose wings, now furled, once flew round Adalhita in night and storm, making her yearn and quail: lo! I alight once more on these black steps, and bring her son — her son and thine — who crouches before thee in quaking flesh and blood."

"Let him raise his head," said an ineffable voice. "There are none of earth's ill souls whose presence here moves me to keener joy.

Descent to Gehenna

He has done my bidding better in the world above than even the dark angels that I sent to guide his steps could wish. Fear not, I am content. He has his mother's eyes, the eyes she bent in shuddering love upon me. Years have passed since then on earth. Fares Adalhita well?"

"The years have fled," answered Ezelin, raising his eyes at last; "the years have fled, and her snowy brow has wrinkled, but there is no dimness in her evil soul."

"Gehenna's flame," said Eblis, "will smoothe her brow. When Death brings her here, my cherubim shall see her in her beauty. She shall stand upon the highest steps, a Queen of Pain, and in her dark magnificence she shall command, a shadow unto shadows. And what of thee, my son?"

"Not in vain hast thou called me thine," answered Ezelin, fixing his eyes fully on the throne. "Whatever there is on earth to torture or to maim, is maimed and is racked

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

wherever men are mine. Would only that my sway over men's lives were wider—that my means were equal to my will. Then wouldst thou praise thy son. Then such dread scenes as would delight thy chill and shadowy heart, would fill the whole great plain that Po sweeps through with his resistless floods.”

“And yet thou art already lord of city on city,” said Eblis. “What wouldst thou more? What sinister ambition has led thy steps to thy father's knee?”

“I would be King of all North Italy.”

“Thy wish is granted,” said Eblis. “But one thing thou must give me: thy first male child born of Selvaggia.”

For a moment Ezelin was silent.

“Thou shalt have it,” he answered.

“Soul as well as limb; unbaptised.”

“Soul too, and unbaptised,” said Ezelin.

“’Tis well,” said Eblis. “Thou shalt be King of all North Italy. Meanwhile, do my

Descent to Gehenna

work in all the cities that are now thine, even as thou hast heretofore. The angels, the dark and silent angels, once divine, but now lost, who do my errands, shall circle ever round thee. Thou art mine, begotten in my image, and everlasting ties bind us to each other. Keep but the pact, and what till now has been only thy wild dream, shall be realised. And now great Sin shall lead thee by the same dark galleries through which thou hast come, my frowning Ezelin, back to life's world. Farewell till the hour when thou shalt come for thy eternal stay."

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Slowly the fumes of the brazier cleared in Ezelin's brain. He was returning to life's upper world—upwards, upwards, ever upwards, through the endless caverns which it had taken him so long to descend. As he emerged through the last winding gullets, and Sin's torch paled in the growing light

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

of day, he opened his eyes and stared with dazed senses about him. The white light of morn was filtering in through the window of Adalhita's turret chamber, and she herself was bending over him. "I told you," she said, as she fanned his brow, "that you would be back by dawn."

Reason flashed back into his eyes. He seized his mother by the wrist, and stared into her face.

"Has it been a dream?"

He waited for her answer, holding his breath.

"What you have seen, you have seen," said Adalhita. "Where you have been, you have been."

V.

The Child.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CASTLE OF LOVE.

THERE was imperial revelry at Verona. The streets surged with throngs and waved with banners. Tapestries of every hue hung from the crowded balconies, and flowers were strewn in incredible abundance beneath the feet of caparisoned and prancing steeds. From palace to palace hung wreaths of greenery and chains of gold, and every gate of the city had been converted into a triumphal arch, where embroidered standards and gaudy devices of heraldry replaced the ghastly trophies which in ordinary times adorned it as a warning to the enemies of Ezelin. For to-day he was marrying Selvaggia; and the mighty Frederick himself had come down from his German possessions

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

to give his daughter away and grace the pageantry with his presence.

Gravely the great blond-bearded Emperor rode through the streets with Ezelin by his side, and followed by a splendid retinue from every part of his motley dominions. Turbaned and scimitared Arabs, lithe olive-faced Greeks, heavy fair-haired Swabians and Saxons, and great steel-capped Burgundians, alternated with swarthy Sicilians and savage-faced men of Apulia, and with Ezelin's Lombards, Friulans, and sallow Slavonians. Frederick himself, as suited his double character, wore a garb half Western and half Oriental, uniting the embroidered doublet of Europe with the scimitar, peaked saddle, and scarlet stirrups of Syria.

And the small pale man who rode at his left hand on the great black steed, looked at the crowd that were doffing their bonnets and shouting for largess, and thought with a smile of contempt how sweet it was to

The Castle of Love

have the people's hearts and to exist but for their good; and how sweet it was to pardon, to resist one's taste for prey, to loathe human pain, and draw all one's inspirations from above. His lip curled as he thought what spontaneity there was in their gladness. Were they not demented with delight and loyalty? Who had ever seen finer arches overhead, or more blossom litter underfoot? Verily, it was sweet to be beloved, especially when love rested on fire and sword and whips and hangmen's nooses. Ay, love that was based on fear acclaimed and hailed its lord like no other, and threw its caps above the very housetops.

The festivities lasted through many days. There seemed to be no limit to the gold that Ezelin was willing to scatter in largess, or to the wine that could run in the fountains of the squares; and although the Emperor's dwarf brought on himself his master's displeasure by suggesting that the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

liquid that bubbled into the marble troughs was of a more sanguinary nature, nothing was wanting to the splendour of the pageants and the magnificence of the games.

Day after day the tourneys and jousts were repeated, and combats in which the Saracens measured their skill against that of the Franks. There Ibrahim, on a superb new Arab that Ezelin had given him, to replace the one that he had killed in the night ride from Castelnovo, carried off prize upon prize, and fought a drawn battle against the brilliant Sordello, most admirable of knights and of poets, with his lion-like brow and mane-like hair, who fought in the morning for the glove of Cunizza, and sang for her smile in the evening. For the troubadours and minnesingers that the great imperial linguist carried in his train fought as bravely with the sword as with the lyre, and poets of four languages vied with each other for his nod and applause.

The Castle of Love

By the irony that seems fated ever to accompany public festivities and the shows of the multitude, every emotion most at variance with the ruling moral atmosphere was celebrated in verse and song; and in the home of daily terror and daily ferocity, nothing was heard but the praises of love and the delicate celebration of beauty.

One of those fanciful shows which delighted the cities of Italy, and which were known as "castles of Love," had been specially organised for the Emperor's pleasure. The most beautiful women and girls, not only of Verona but of the neighbouring cities, all wearing jewelled crowns and wreathed with garlands of roses, had been chosen to defend the battlements of a flower-strung wooden fortress against the assault of brilliant soldiers, gaily garbed youths, who, under the standards of their respective cities, stormed them with flowers and fruits, with spices and sweetmeats, with golden arrows and

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

showers of golden balls—and in the middle of the fortress, on a throne of blossoms, sat the Queen of Love, Selvaggia, holding a golden palm, the guerdon for the assailant who should be the first to reach her if her fair garrison should have failed to defend her. As she sat there in her royal robes, she looked indeed worthy of her part; for beautiful as were the girls that the cities had sent as their fairest, there was none of them whom the strange, exotic beauty of Frederick's daughter did not utterly eclipse. She had built up her wonderful hair into a sort of crown of natural gold, studded with all the Emperor's jewels; and from beneath it the great dark eyes which proclaimed her Syrian blood looked down upon the battle indifferent and superb.

Assault after assault was repelled. The hail of golden missiles fell futile, and the flowery ammunition of the assailants seemed about to run short. The standards on both

The Castle of Love

sides waved and swayed as the fight ebbed and flowed, and the battlements rang with the triumphant cries and laughter of the besieged. Then, all at once, there was clamour of confusion and consternation, and the fair defenders of one of the corner turrets were seen to fall back in disorder. Then a score of the assailants broke over the battlements, and one of them, leaping on to the rampart, had in one second distanced his companions, and fell at the Queen of Love's feet. But there was no triumph in his eyes.

"Selvaggia," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Selvaggia is dead," she answered in a whisper lower than his own; "and Hermann is dead too."

He took the palm from her hand, and flung it from him; and in another moment he was lost in the swarm of the conquerors.

Yet all was not flowery pageant, nor were shows more after Ezelin's own heart wanting to grace the imperial festivities. In the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

great Roman arena, which still stands in Verona for men's wonder, and almost rivals the Flavian amphitheatre of Rome, the sanguinary games of antiquity were revived to the acclamations of twenty thousand spectators. The countless circles of seats rose tier above tier, till the last row of heads stood out against the blue sky—all as crowded as when, a thousand years before, the subjects of Diocletian and Maximian had deafened the air with their shouts, and turned down their thumbs for the death blow. For Ezelin had read, or had heard from those who had, of the great shows of the dying empire, and had been to enormous expense to imitate their splendour. He had obtained, through Constantinople, wild beasts which most of his subjects had never seen, and some of which, perhaps, they had never even heard of. And as some maddened rhinoceros or skulking hyæna turned and rent its pursuer, or as some mortally wounded elephant flung

The Castle of Love

a lion twenty feet into the air, and then rolled over with the tower on its back, the applause that drowned the yells proved that the mob was as ready as ever to forget for bread and games.

There Selvaggia sat now between her father and Ezelin, strangely cold and unmoved. There was nothing in her look or her manner to remind any one who might have chanced to have known her in Sicily of the wild and passionate creature whose adventures had been the talk of the palace at Palermo. She sat by her terrible bridegroom's side more like a statue than like a living woman—so seldom did a gesture or a look of interest escape her. Only the great dark eyes, now and then, swept over the sea of faces around her with a sudden searching look, as if she sought for some face that should have been there, but was not.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WORKING OF THE PACT.

ONE year passed, and then a second and a third; and still Selvaggia had borne Ezelin no child. Under any other circumstances, requiring an heir, as he did, he would soon have found the way to remove her—his mother would have seen to that. But the case was peculiar. Even if she had not been the living link which bound him to the Emperor, and as such of incalculable political importance, she was part and parcel of the great dark pact which he believed himself to have made, and on which his earthly ambition was based. The child whose soul was to be the price of a royal crown must be hers and no other's.

His gloomy and sinister being grew

The Working of the Pact

gloomier and more sinister at the untoward delay, with which he could not help connecting a strange pause in his hitherto unchecked and triumphant career. Not that his arms had met so far with any notable reverse; but the constant march from victory to victory, which had marked his previous years, seemed to have come to an end. When, therefore, he at last saw signs that his wish was about to be fulfilled, there was no limit to the horrible joy which flooded his soul, and though later a reaction followed, he had but one thought: Now all would change; and his onward march to dominion would be resumed in all its glory.

The child was born—a son, whose arrival was hailed by the fulsome rejoicings of the innumerable sycophants who attested his power.

And now a surprising change took place in the whole being of Selvaggia. During

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the years of her childlessness, she had been as a statue, or rather as an automaton—silent, cold, and uninterested; moving without apparent pleasure or pain; fulfilling the necessary duties of her station with stately indifference; neither entering into the doings of her merciless lord, nor attempting to thwart or to mitigate his actions. But all at once, through the birth of the child, her whole nature seemed changed. The automaton woke into life. The indifference turned into passion, the passion of a wild animal for its young. An extraordinary jealousy flashed in her eyes. For a long while she would allow no one to handle the infant but herself; and, for the first time in his life, Ezelin found a contemptuous will opposed to his own, and under his own roof. Not that he had ever mistaken her for a Gisla. He knew well enough that there was neither submissiveness nor self-sacrifice in her soul. But her indifference had misled him;

The Working of the Pact

and he now recognised for the first time that she was a power.

"When will the child be christened?" she asked.

"It will be christened in due time," he answered. "There is no hurry." And day on day passed by, and week on week.

Selvaggia, though half a Syrian, was, unlike her imperial and philosophical father, a strictly conforming Christian. Her suspicions were at once aroused by the unusual delay. Ezelin kept promising, and as continually deferring, the ceremony.

"You don and doff your pledges like a doublet," she said at last one day. "Will this child be christened, yes or no? The thing will soon be the scoff of the world."

"Your words are wild," he said, knitting his brows; "but I will answer them. Have I not said, ay, more than once, that since the Pope has styled my rule accursed, and

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

excommunicated me, the priests fear to christen any child of mine?"

"What priest could dread the Pope as he dreads *you*? They only need hear your order, to obey. Did not a priest join us in wedlock the very year the interdict was launched?"

"I am not wont to waste discussion. There are grounds of state, and that is enough. I'll have no words on the subject. . . . By all the fiends that sit at Hell's gate, if you were not Frederick's daughter——"

"Ay, that's it. . . . Were I not Frederick's daughter——" Selvaggia answered with a scornful laugh. "If, of late, you seem to have forgotten it, let me tell you that *I* have not, and that you are wise to call it to mind. What if I should think fit to make him arbiter between us?"

Ezelin, under ordinary circumstances, would have sent the speaker to the torture on far slighter provocation. But it was part of his

The Working of the Pact

character to exert at times extraordinary repression on his own violence; and an icy smile met her words.

“The days are past, fair lady,” he answered, “for using such a threat; and you must try another, if you have another in reserve. My foot is set too high upon the ladder of success for me to fear your father. What is Frederick to me now? I need him less than he needs me, and can dispense both with his help and with his interference. I needed an alliance with his imperial house, to press its stamp upon my own; and for a while I needed the assistance of his troops. And so, my love, I sought your hand in marriage. But things have changed since then. I now stand high above the heads of those with whose concerns it were wise for even him to meddle. Every move upon the chess-board of my destinies obeys a Power of which you know nothing, and compared with which, his shrinks to insignificance. But it grows late. By now,

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

methinks, you should have sought your rooms."

"Ay, it grows late," she answered. "Your words confirm certain thoughts that I have had in these weeks. I see that you'll afford no light to clear my doubt. I can but think. . . . But out of thought springs action," she added under her breath, as, with a long meditative look at him, she turned and left the hall in which they stood.

Ezelin remained standing as she had left him. He had never seen her look so royal. Ay, she was the true child of her father. But, by the Lord of Evil, she was bold . . . and on the brink of dangerous ground. . . . Yet no, he had nothing to fear; and he needed her. She served his purpose as a necessary link with Frederick's house; and she was a fitting mate to tread his upward paths. Some day, however, if she pushed things too far, it might be well to send her to explore the land of ghosts where Gisla

The Working of the Pact

mused. As to this matter of the christening, he must consult with one from whom he had no secrets, and who knew the pact, the great dark pact, which he had made.

As if in answer to his thought, the heavy tapestry of the door was lifted, and Adalhita entered. Was it a coincidence that as she did so, the warm sunshine of the late afternoon suddenly died out upon the wall, and the cold greyness of early twilight spread itself through the room?

"Alone, my son?" she said, "alone and brooding?"

"Selvaggia still presses for the christening," he answered; "and, as you know, I cannot satisfy her wish."

"No," said Adalhita, "we must offer up the child unchristened. Not Christ's font, but ours. The Lord of Evil Thoughts would not fulfil the bond, if it were christened. The Powers of Heaven must lay no finger on it."

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"When must the deed be done?" he asked gloomily.

"The time has not yet come," his mother replied, "though it must be soon, since she is growing restive. The work calls for preparation. Perhaps when the moon shall next be at the full. And first of all, that we may be able to cast the guilt upon the Jews, suspicion must at once be made to fall upon their sect. Rumours must be spread that they use the blood of Christian infants in their rites, so that the people may immediately accuse them on the news of the child's disappearance. Meanwhile, I will spend the nights in gazing into the silent pools of my forbidden knowledge with the dark spirits that keep me company. I have mysterious rules for finding day and hour. Leave all to me."

"I would not have you think, mother, that my purpose has cooled. But though the thing has to be done, the sacrifice is heavy."

The Working of the Pact

Adalhita looked at him for a moment with something that was almost a shade of contempt.

"Are you weak?" she said.

"No," he answered. "But there is in more or less degree in every ruler's heart, something that makes him wish for an heir of his own blood to carry out his plans, and keep together the edifice of state that he has raised. My soul is not without such yearnings."

"You must stamp out the mood," his mother replied. "Selvaggia may still bear you another heir. I too must conquer my love for my own brood: for is it not my grandchild? But I will tear out my heart-strings before you see me shrink. Have you forgotten, and do you think that a crown is not worth the price? But come, my son, these thoughts are idle. Time does not wait for the man who waits to dare. Is it on the brink of royal power that a man should

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

stand and weigh the sum he has to pay? A crown is now in sight, and before I die, I mean to see it won. King of North Italy!"

"You are right," he replied. "These thoughts are idle. It is only the weak who plumb the depths of their own souls. The strong man's bark sails lightly on victorious tides."

CHAPTER XXV.

A MEETING OF GHOSTS.

DURING the years that followed the marriage, Hermann was only once or twice in attendance at Ezelin's palace. He and Selvaggia avoided all intercourse. Yet his passion for her had not diminished, and he sometimes wondered how he managed to keep it from rushing forth like pent-up lava and sweeping all into blind annihilation; and there came every now and then an hour that set his dagger shuddering in its sheath. The real fact was, that his hands were tied by the knowledge that any attempt to meet Selvaggia as her lover would bring certain destruction upon her. That it would bring death to himself weighed little in his counsels; but death to Selvaggia——

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

And at the same time he had an engrained instinct of military fidelity and obedience to Ezelin, who exerted an extraordinary power over the minds of his officers, though, of late, he had certainly pushed his exactions imprudently far. Still the Swabian was faithful.

He thought of the time when he had held Selvaggia in his arms in the Sicilian garden; when he had breathed the breath of her enchantment and heard her words of love. And now she passed him with a stately inclination of the head as the wife of Ezelin; more out of reach than the summits of yonder Alps, whose snows none might tread, and which it was death to scale. For her, he said to himself, he was but a captain of Ezelin's Swabians; and no speech, no sign, no look might pass between them.

But on one occasion, after her last stormy talk with Ezelin, she spoke.

Hermann had come up from the camp on military business, and was walking on the

A Meeting of Ghosts

terrace which overlooked the palace garden, one evening at sunset, when he saw her coming towards him with a gorgeously dressed nurse carrying her infant. He stepped aside to let them pass; but she came on, raising her hand as if she wished to speak. Then, fastening a curious look upon his face, she asked him, as if he had been a stranger, whether he had seen an amulet that she had dropped—an emerald amulet. She spoke in the hearing of the nurse.

“I thought you might have found it,” she said. “It was once found by one who is dead, and given to one who has long been dead too. Mark me,” she continued in a lower tone, “they are dead; and being dead, they must sleep as the dead do.”

A trembling silenced him; he bowed his head. Then, with a look that he could not fathom, “I must have dropped the amulet elsewhere,” she said, and took some steps to leave; but suddenly came back to where he

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

stood, and in a voice that shook and which was so low that her attendant could not hear the words—"Do you think," she said, "that the dead, in the pale land where they wander, can ever lend each other a helping hand? Say: if that woman who is dead should ever be in some great jeopardy, could she command her dead friend's help to save her?" He could see that she hung upon his answer, and replied, "Ay, surely she could trust him, he and she having once loved. The dead would help the dead."

Then, with an inscrutable smile, she inclined her head and passed on.

"You had once found such an amulet?" asked Lionello, when Hermann told him of the meeting.

"Yes, in Sicily."

"'Tis very strange," said Lionello. "It is well you spoke no further. It is a thing of black and boundless peril to exchange even vague words with one who is the wife of

A Meeting of Ghosts

Ezelin. However far you let your rash thoughts carry you, oh, let your tongue be dumb, as you value your life,—save some great need should force you to speak again. The air is rife with death. Joy dies like a plant in the dark in the shadow of these walls, where no thoughts that are not evil have ever thriven. . . . Once, long ago, I knew another woman here who ate away her heart in that dreadful shade; and though——”

But he left the sentence unfinished.

“Come,” he said, “let us go. Night has gathered while we have idled here. How dark it is! No stars are overhead.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOLY WATER.

WEEKS went by. A dreadful fear was in Selvaggia's heart: a fear more cruel than any concerning her own safety; a fear for the security of her child's soul.

Everything led her to believe that the postponement of its baptism was part of a plot concocted by Ezelin and his mother, but of which she herself only vaguely suspected the nature. She knew Adalhita's sinister fame as a dealer in forbidden science; and Ezelin's subservience to his mother in such matters was known to her but too well. Selvaggia had for her child something of a wild animal's love for its young; and if, as she believed, its spiritual, if not its bodily safety was threatened, she was determined to fight for it

Holy Water

to the last extremity. She would have done so openly; but she persuaded herself that it would be more to the child's advantage to resort to stratagem and have it baptised secretly, than to carry on her contest against Ezelin with open violence. But how to carry out such a design? She realised for the first time with bitterness in her soul her extraordinary isolation. To what friend should she turn? There was indeed one whose help she kept in reserve as a last resource in case of imminent personal danger. But Hermann happened to be away, and so could afford her no assistance in her present plight. Besides, communication with him at any time was perilous. The few priests to whom she had access were all creatures of her husband's and discarded by the Church, and would certainly have revealed to him any overtures that she might have made to them. In her necessity she turned her thoughts to Lionello, the captain of the Lombards. There was something

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

in his face, something in his eyes, that had attracted her. His manner had won her confidence. The man was somehow different from the other officers of Ezelin with whom she came in contact. Would he smile at her fears? would he betray her? She determined to risk it.

But Lionello, so far from scouting her terrors, entered at once into her dark suspicions. He knew too much of Ezelin and Adalhita not to realise the danger. He agreed with her that she would gain nothing by communicating her fears to the official and semi-excommunicated confessor that Ezelin had appointed for her benefit, and suggested their having recourse to one of a very different character, and over whom Ezelin had no hold; one whose sanctity was famous throughout the whole of North Italy, and who was rumoured to have once bearded Ezelin himself even in his very palace. "Seek help from Fra Luca,"

Holy Water

said Lionello; "he alone can give you counsel. Perhaps he himself will secretly baptise the child for you. He alone will believe you, and dare to do the thing for the sake of God."

But how to reach the anchorite: that was the difficulty. His very whereabouts was unknown and constantly shifting. It was dangerous to make inquiries on the point; and it was still more dangerous to seek an interview with him. In this conjuncture, chance brought it to their knowledge that Fra Luca happened to be the guest of another hermit who dwelt but some three or four miles outside the city, or rather that the latter had lent him his hermitage for a while. The next step was to take advantage of one of Ezelin's many short absences from home, to steal with the child out of the palace, and to seek the anchorite by night. They could be back before daybreak.

So one night, when Ezelin was away be-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

sieging a rebel stronghold, Selvaggia and the nurse, whose anxiety for the child's soul was almost as great as her own, set out, closely hooded, with the infant.

Their path lay through lonely woods. Under the dark trees, that seemed to extend claw-like branches to seize them, the nurse was full of terror, and Selvaggia at every step had to encourage and reassure her. Every rustle seemed to her the feet of pursuers, every shadow the figure of a lurking enemy. How dark it was! Selvaggia caught herself wondering whether the black Swabian forest, where stood the towers of Hermann's kin, was as black. And she wished herself there. Would the wolves that it held be as savage and merciless as the human wolves that beset her here in Italy? Would the yawning abyss round those dizzy towers be as deep as the abyss of isolation and terror that surrounded her here? Would the snows of the north, that had seemed to her so

Holy Water

cheerless by the shore of the blue Sicilian sea, be as cold as the icy breath of the loveless years that she had lived in the horrible shadow of Ezelin? Fool, fool that she had been. All her happy free life in Sicily passed before her mental eyes with astonishing vividness. She was back by the wonderful tideless waters, by the shattered columns of those unknown temples. She was sitting with Hermann on the rocks above the gurgling and glittering waves, with life before her, not behind her; and the love she had thrown away was again in her heart.

But the black claw-like branches of the trees were above her, and they extended their talons to seize her; and it was not love but darkness and haste and terror that now mastered her soul. And she stumbled along with the nurse and the child.

At last they reached the spot and found the hermitage. They knocked, and after some delay the door was opened.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Women, what do you seek? I am engaged in prayer," said Fra Luca.

"This child needs help."

"Is it in urgent pain?" asked the anchorite.

"It is in peril, great peril; not of limb, but of soul," said Selvaggia.

"Of soul!" cried Fra Luca in astonishment. "But how? Explain."

"This child is Ezelin's."

"Ezelin's!"

"And I . . . I am Selvaggia,—Ezelin's wife. . . . Oh, refrain from questions till I've spoken. Do not waste the minutes. If I am discovered, it means death with all my sins unshriven. Listen: There is some dreadful plot against this child—I think against its soul and not against its life. On pretexts fair or foul, Christ's baptism is denied it. I feel that Ezelin and his dreadful mother are prowling round its soul like wolves. Will you affix Christ's mark upon its brow and save it?"

Holy Water

"This appeal is too abrupt," answered Fra Luca. "The Church has cursed its father——"

"What of that?" cried Selvaggia. "Oh, would you slam the portals of the ark in its sweet face because of him who begat its guiltless life? because of what he is? Oh, give its soul a chance, no matter what may be its father's deeds; and though the child is his, oh visit not the father's sin. . . ."

"It is written: 'Unto the third and fourth generation,'" said the ecstatic.

"Earth's penalties are set aside in heaven," cried Selvaggia. "Oh christen it: there's grace for sinners there."

"Ay, there is grace," said Fra Luca, thoughtfully.

"Baptise it quick: the perilous minutes are running out."

"A child of Ezelin's?" hesitated the anchorite, speaking more to himself than to the two women. "A child of Ezelin's. . . . And

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

yet its face is human. Sleep never lay more beautiful upon child's features. . . . There is no trace of its accurst descent. Did not Christ say: 'Let the little children come unto me'? Give me the child, Selvaggia."

"It is saved!" cried the mother.

"I little thought that I should ever give a child of his the sign of Christ," he murmured. "Yet I agree to do it for Christ's sake. For it may live to pray for its father; to intercede perhaps with Heaven for his soul; nay, perhaps to lead his soul to God. What if it were to win God's ear, though Ezelin now blackens the earth on which he stands? Come, Selvaggia."

And he led the way into the little chapel of the hermitage.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE EMPTY CRADLE.

FROM the moment that the child had been secretly baptised, there was a great diminution of the antagonism between Ezelin and Selvaggia,—on his side because she ceased to press the christening upon him; and on hers, because she believed her child to be safe. She had no reason to suspect any attempt on its life; and its soul was out of peril. So for some weeks there was peace in the palace. Save at meals and in public, she saw but little of her husband, who was much with Adalhita.

She had no lack of opportunity of meeting Lionello, who commanded the men-at-arms quartered in and about the palace. The service he had rendered her had estab-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

lished a firm friendship between them; and the more she saw of him, the greater was the confidence with which he inspired her. She discovered that he had been the friend of her predecessor, Gisla, about whose life, and especially about whose death, she now felt growing curiosity, and questioned him about her dreadful fate. Lionello's lips had been sealed for years on the subject, but Selvaggia at last got him to speak; and the long silence once broken, he seemed to feel an indescribable pleasure in dwelling on the slightest details of her life. If Gisla had been a saint for him while living, how much more was she one now that she was dead? He had built for her a jewelled shrine of surpassing richness in his heart, and daily brought to it new incense. Selvaggia could not understand how, with such a love, Lionello should never have sought to avenge her death. Her own semi-barbaric nature could grasp his char-

The Empty Cradle

acter in this respect as little as it could grasp that of Gisla.

They were on the palace terrace, looking down on the gardens about sunset. The perfume of unnumbered roses reached them from below. The tall cypresses reminded Selvaggia of the gardens of Sicily, and of the loves of which they had been the scene. All the old yearning woke again. A sudden impulse seized her to tell him of the old days in Sicily; of her father's Sicilian Court; of the glorious leopard hunts; of the dazzling Trinacrian sea; of her wild free youth—but of her connection with Hermann, not a word.

“Yes, it is all over,” she said. “I married Ezelin, and I must take my fate as I have made it; though, now that I have a child, and that its soul is safe, I have still something to live for. I have none of Gisla's virtues, nor shall I have her fate; for Ezelin needs me, and perhaps to a certain

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

extent dreads me—at least I think so. The day when he ceases to do so, I shall see to my own safety. No, I have nothing to fear for myself as yet; and my child is safe.”

“Are you quite sure?” Lionello said.

Selvaggia started. “What do you mean?” she cried.

“I mistrust both Ezelin and Adalhita,” he answered, “but most Adalhita. Did you not tell me that Ezelin’s behaviour with respect to your child was strange, very strange? That he would sit with his eyes fixed upon it for whole minutes in a sombre, brooding stare, and muttering inaudible words?”

“But now the child is christened,” she said, “I can have nothing to fear.”

“May your security be justified,” Lionello rejoined; “but I fear.” And with a doubtful shake of the head, he left her.

Selvaggia remained sitting alone on the terrace. The sun went down in unusual splendour. Her eyes were fixed on the rest-

The Empty Cradle

less glow of the gold. She seemed to see the faces of little infant angels peeping out of it every now and again. Then, as her consciousness of external things diminished, and her sight turned into vision, born perhaps of some old fairy tale that she had heard in her childhood, the innumerable little flakes of downy gold into which the cloud-world was broken up, took the shape of a great flight of little winged cherubs, and she remembered an old Sicilian legend, that when a child's martyrdom sends up a little soul to heaven, the countless winged cherubs who were once the Innocents murdered by Herod, fly to meet it, and carry it straight to God's feet. So she sat and watched the clouds till the gold and amber and topaz and pearl faded gradually, and were succeeded by the twilight. Then only she shook herself, rose, and re-entered the palace.

She went straight to the room where she had left her infant. All was quiet. The

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

nurse sat by the side of the cradle, sleeping heavily—the invincible drowsiness of one who has been drugged, and Selvaggia's entrance did not wake her. Then the mother bent over the cradle. It was empty.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNDER THE WITCHES' MOON.

A FEW hours later a great change had come over the sky. The wind had sprung up and had driven the little downy clouds of sunset into a great black mass, which again it tore into flying tatters that it swept before it. The moon rose and raced through the dun and silver. Below it, in a lonely and desolate spot, the plain was strewn with big boulders and rain-left pools, and stretched away into the distance dim and misty. By one of the largest of these boulders, which formed a sort of rude altar, a weird, grey-haired figure stood holding an infant in her arms. Night, she muttered to herself, had cast her leper's cloak on Nature, and the moon was as the leprous face. Such as this, she thought, had been

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the wan nights, when, in times long past, she had met the dark power whose embrace had made her as the very Queen of Evil and the chosen vessel of all malefice. As far as the eye could reach, no living being stirred. But she knew that innumerable witches would start up at her call from behind every stone and every bush.

Adalhita laid her sleeping burden on the high flat stone.

“O Lord, dark Lord,” she said, “I bring the blood thou claimest, even that of Ezelin’s first born. When, like a bat, the unbaptised soul shall flutter up for thee to seize, then thou wilt fill the measure of my desire, and make my son a king. But first thy mark must be upon it.”

She looked up once more at the sky. As the moon-thrown shadows of the clouds swept over her and over the rude altar by which she stood, they alternately showed her and hid her, bringing out in rapid glimpses her

Under the Witches' Moon

fell grey-haired beauty that age could not conquer, and darkening the darkness of the deep sockets of her eyes. Her garments flapped in the wind, and, clinging to her limbs, made her look even taller than she was; while her arms, on which she had rolled back the sleeves, gleamed white and strong and still shapely in the light. So may Medea have looked as she flung her incantations on the wind and flying shadows, and whetted her knife for the sacrifice. But her mediæval counterpart looked surely more cruel and more weird. Presently the wind grew stronger and loosened her long grey locks, which twisted and streamed like silvery adders round her head and behind it, so that it was rather a Medusa than a Medea that she resembled.

There was a natural hollow that the weather had scooped out in the stone altar, and that the recent rain had filled. "The font is ready found," she said to herself.

She laid down her knife on the stone beside

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

the sleeping infant, and passed her hand over the little pool sacramentally up and down, inverting the movements of the priest who blesses water, and muttered rhythmic monotonous spells over it in the name of her master. Then, dipping her white fingers in the unholy font, she drew them over the brow of the child, and made upon it the unutterable sign.

But the infant slept on, strangely peaceful in spite of the touch of her wet pale fingers and of the flapping of her garments in the wind.

"Now I may summon them," she muttered.

She whistled three times—a long shrill whistle; and, in the misty moonlit plain, countless figures as weird as herself cropped up and formed a great circle around her.

Were they creatures of her brain, which had at last given way in the excitement of her life's greatest crime? Were they phantoms of mist and moon, wreathing round her from the desolate swamps? Or were they real beings of flesh and blood, the congregation of famine

Under the Witches' Moon

and despair—many of them mad like herself—that the misery of a starving century, and the horrors of serfdom and war and oppression, had united in the great reel of a witches' Sabbath? Who can say? Round her they at first slowly circled—slowly, slowly, like the curls of a marsh; then faster and ever faster, till her eyes could scarcely follow them, as, arm within arm, and with their backs to herself and to the centre, they rotated in their horrible dance of madness and sin.

Then the great Priestess of Evil raised her knife, which gleamed in the moonlight, and struck. But, as she did so, her eyes were held by another light—one more golden. She staggered back.

What was that? What was that? An aureole framing a face that she had thought dead? What was it that came nearer and nearer, while the shapes of the reel scampered away and melted like ghosts in the distance? Was it the halo round the moon that her crazy

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

brain transformed into the figure of Gisla, of Gisla crowned with a nimbus and laying her hand on the murdered child? Was it the sound of the wind that made her shudder and cower in unconquerable fear?

"Come, little child," it said—and it was Gisla's very voice. "Come, little child; I'll take thee up to heaven."

And Adalhita threw up her arms, and fell with a great cry.

VI.

Ibrahim.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WANING POWER.

MORE years went by; but they did not bring the fulfilment of Ezelin's ambition. The human forces which he had bent into submission seemed rather to grow more stubborn year by year, and his dominion more difficult to hold. His power was based on fear; and fear for himself forced him continually to increase fear in others. In each of his cities imaginary conspiracies were for ever the pretext for measures of indescribable cruelty; and those measures never ceased to give rise to real plots. It was a vicious circle. Padua especially was the object of his fear and of his rage. One after the other, the members of the great Paduan families—the Delesmannini, the Caponegri, the Camposam-

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

pieri—were decapitated or worse. Some, like the four kinsmen Da Vado, were walled up in a tower to have the fate of Ugolino, and their ghosts were long seen in the twilight gnawing the moss and the ivy off the pitiless stone.

At Verona, at Vicenza, at Belluno, at Feltre—in all his cities—it was the same reign of terror; and in all of them the nobles, driven by fear to accuse each other, ended by sharing the same fate. The other cities which he had made sure of mastering one by one, terrified by the example of those which had succumbed, clung desperately to their stormy independence; and his power, which at one moment had seemed destined to overshadow the whole of North Italy, rather diminished than increased.

Frederick was dead, and the wrath which the Pope had poured on the head of the infidel Emperor was now poured on that of Ezelin in yet greater abundance. His furious persecution of all things ecclesiastical, and his seizure of the servants and property of

Waning Power

the Church, had brought on him repeated interdicts, and a series of summonses to which he had returned only the most insolent answers. Then, after exhausting all its thunders, the Church had had recourse to the most terrible weapon in its spiritual armoury, the preaching of a crusade against him. The Pope had written to the inquisitors, ordering that whoever should embrace the Cross against Ezelin should obtain the same indulgences as were granted in the case of a crusade for the recovery of Christ's sepulchre. The bishops were enjoined to give the Papal Legate all help and assistance, and the world was invited to make war on Ezelin, "on the man of blood, on the son of perdition."

And first of all the Legate had recourse to the Venetians, to whom Ezelin, encamped as it were on the brink of the lagoons, had given great umbrage, and whose Doge had seen his own son hanged after the battle of Cortenova by Frederick, Ezelin's master. The

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

Legate in person, assisted by the Patriarch of Aquileia and by a host of bishops and mitred abbots, celebrated Mass in St. Mark's amid the golden glint of mosaics and in presence of the Doge and of all the clergy of Venice with the silver crosses carried before them. And when Mass was over, he went forth into the great square outside, where the *loggie* had been recently erected, and there preached the crusade from a high-raised platform to the immense concourse that filled them. Marco Badoer, a Venetian, was put at the head of all the forces, while a thousand cross-bowmen, under the standard of the Winged Lion, formed the special contingent of the republic. The Paduan exiles, and all the other enemies of the despot, flocked beneath the standard of the Church, which was borne by a Franciscan friar, and the army marched forth to the sound of innumerable hymns.

And so it had come to pass that Ezelin

Waning Power

had lost the first of his cities. He was engaged in operations near Mantua, when a rider, worn and breathless, announced that Padua, which Ezelin had left in charge of his nephew, had fallen before the onset of the Legate's forces. He had the messenger hanged on the spot, but Padua had fallen none the less. He had attributed but little importance to the crusade, fortified as he was by his astrologers, and by his belief in his great shadowy protector. But now he understood; for the loss of Padua was a mighty blow.

In Padua, which they sacked, the allies opened the prisons and set free Ezelin's captives—three hundred in the prison of St. Sophia, as many in the citadel, and four hundred and seventy in the "Zilie." In all upwards of a thousand—maimed, mutilated, blinded, or tongueless.

The Legate, whose army was strengthened by that of the Marquess of Este, had next

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

marched upon Vicenza; but Ezelin had driven them off; and from Verona, which he held by dint of atrocious executions, had tried in three assaults to recapture Padua, but in vain.

Then it was that he had offered up to his shadowy master the most frightful of his holocausts, massacring in cold blood eleven thousand of his Paduan troops, whom he had disarmed and thrown into his prisons.

He could still reckon on the levies of Verona, Vicenza, Feltre, Belluno, Bergamo, Cremona, Piacenza, and other cities, as well as on his German, Saracen, and other mercenaries, and he felt the strength of his genius.

He was now at Brescia, which he had succeeded in capturing, and whither he had summoned his astrologers; and there, as he walked up and down one of the rooms of the palace where he had taken up his quarters, he reviewed his situation.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LEOPARDESS AT BAY.

WHERE was the fulfilment of his pact? He had lost Padua, and his enemies were daily growing in number. Yet the tide of war should long ago have turned, and, obeying the promise of Gehenna, should have swept him on to conquest. And the bond that had been concluded in the red caverns? What could have marred that mighty pledge? What was lacking? Had he not kept the dark engagement? "Thy first-born son, and unbaptised." Had it been ill offered up; or, had they failed in any point of the dreadful rite? His mother had made all sure. Though old and frail in body, her immaterial parts had been as dire and as baleful as in the prime of youth. No; all had been done;

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

and the Shadowy Ruler of Evil Hearts was bound, bound to fulfil the pact.

He stopped in his walk up and down.

"If only she were still here," he muttered. "If only she were still here, to help me with her counsels—to see the great fulfilment, . . . for surely the tide will turn; the pact will be fulfilled, and fulfilled soon." And then he thought of her inexplicable death: how she had been found dead by the altar on which lay the dead body of the child. What great rebound of passion's mainspring had killed her—killed her as if with fright? Or was it his dread and dusky sire who had required her in the dark red glare of his terrific realm, where surely she now sat higher than all doomed souls, enthroned in her cruel strength and dreadful beauty, made young again by flame?—such as she was when, as the bride of Eblis, she had sunk to rest in his shadowy arms, the Queen of Cruelty, the Empress of Enchantments?

The Leopardess at Bay

And what of Selvaggia—Selvaggia, who suspected him of the murder of her child, and grew more dark and brooding year by year? She was a very leopardess, as savage as her own name. The stolen cub had been dear to its fierce mother, and she would never forgive. She was growing daily more irksome. But he could not afford to rid himself of her presence. She must live for a little while longer. He dared not yet set her aside; for, though Frederick was now dead, she might still perhaps bear him another heir, who would be Frederick's grandson, and, as such, a pillar for his power. She was loved by his Swabians and his Saracens, and helped him to rule his Moslem cavalry, whose tongue she spoke and whose blood she shared. And, curse her, here she was again with her sing-song of suspicion. He had called her a leopardess. Ay, a leopardess indeed; one who prowled round and round, mewing for ever for her stolen cub.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

A curtain was drawn aside, and Selvaggia entered.

"You say it was the Jews?" she said.

"Of what use to repeat it for the hundredth time?" he answered darkly. "Do you deny that they use the blood of Christian infants in their rites? that they often pour streams of it on their altars? . . . Do you not know that your child has long since been avenged by worse tortures than ever fell to the lot of their accursed race?"

"The Jews? the Jews?" she retorted. "And how was it that on the spot where he was offered up, close to that wild and bloody stone, your mother's corpse was found, with a knife still in her hand?"

"Because they killed her with the child that she was trying to save, and then placed the knife between her fingers."

"Your mother was a witch."

"She was possessed of greater knowledge and had greater powers than common mortals.

The Leopardess at Bay

The world is envious, and it dubbed her witch."

"I add my verdict to the universal heap."

Ezelin looked at her with his icy smile.

"Sweet lady, are you not a little mad?" he said.

She glared at him like the leopardess he had called her.

"Do you think," she cried, "that my suspicions were asleep, and that I didn't watch you by night and day—you and your evil mother? Do you think I keep no memory of your whispers and your play of nod and glance? No, it was not the Jews who stole my child. I had been warned of some black plot; and now that I know that the knife was found in her dead hand, your tale about the Jews has less truth in it than ever. Oh, if the ground could yawn and split beneath the feet of guilt, I know whose the feet would be! Crowned or uncrowned, woe to you and your house. I am no Gisla—oh! I

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

know her story—to pine and die in silence. If you wish, I'll tell you how she died. Nor do I quail before your power. I know that you have need of me and mine. Oh, you may smile and rail. But there's a God above; and He will strike at last. I know that you had a hand in my child's death. The years are gliding fast away for both of us; and while you've planned and planned, I've wept and wept. But think not I forget nor yet forgive. The eternal edicts stand; and God, the Avenger, will avenge me yet!"

She paused, exhausted by the torrent of her words.

"I tell you it was the Jews," he repeated, while his sneer darkened into a threatening scowl. "I tell you it was the Jews. But is your wrath not growing somewhat rash? Your words have set my fancy working. . . . Gisla? . . . Her story is not without instruction. Since you know it, if you are wise you will avoid walking in her paths, and you will

The Leopardess at Bay

ponder on her death. It is very fit for meditation."

And fixing his menacing eyes in a long steady look, he turned and left her.

But though she made no answer, the look she sent after him was as threatening as his own.

"He's dangerous," she said to herself. "But so perhaps am I. I am not the woman to sit and wait for death like Gisla. And now I know for certain that it was he and his dark beldam of a mother. . . . A blow has to be struck. Will he or I strike first? Which, now, will be the quicker, he or I? I have to act; and before this day is over, I must find helpers, and gather other hatreds round my own. I dare not wait."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MIRACLE.

SOON after, in long-oppressed but now liberated Padua, a strange scene was enacted in the Cathedral—not in the church which at present bears that name, for it was not yet in existence, but in a much older edifice.

An immense concourse of armed men stood with drawn swords and bent heads round the pulpit; while, beyond them, monks, priests, and old and young, filled the nave and aisles to overflowing. In the pulpit itself stood Fra Luca—pale, haggard, dishevelled, with great sunken eyes that flamed with fanaticism or fever—preaching the crusade which the Church had proclaimed against Ezelin.

“Now at last God is hunting this man

The Miracle

down," he cried, his voice rolling in thunder-like peals under the great arches, "and ye are God's own hounds. Terrific game! . . . This man? Did I say this man? He does not own man's nature: why give him human title? Let me rather call him this dread and dark wild beast, more scant of pity and more tameless than a starving wolf;—the monster who has never ceased to torture, blind, and crucify; whom woman, child, and priest have vainly sued for respite, and whom none, however fair, however old or weak, have ever moved to mercy.

"He has done his work of hell. But we may not ask why God has waited all these years to hunt him down and let the nations wreak their vengeance on him. If God appears inscrutable, it is that we lack His light. We know but this, that each of us hears God's trump, and knows it leads the chase."

The preacher paused, and watched the rustle

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

of excitement that ran over the faces of the crowd like a wind over dark waters. Then, lifting his hand with a gesture that stopped the murmur—

“This is no new fight,” he went on. “It is long since he was excommunicated and since this holy war was preached. Do you remember how, one night, the very monks, forgetful of their state, seized pike and spear and sword, and marched with shouts to form a fierce militia? And yet the Lord let Ezelin live on. But now, at last, the cities that once trembled at his word are throwing off his yoke. The lands have cast their fear behind them; and were it not for his dark-skinned Paynim soldiery, the blast of wrath were over, and the blot would have been wiped away from the sunny face of earth.

“O men of Padua—ye who know what awaits you if he conquers; ye who stood so lately in his power; ye who beheld eleven thousand butchered in cold blood, your fathers,

The Miracle

sons, and brothers, young and old—all men of this city, where the dungeons stand, in which the rack worked ceaseless; ye who command where lately ye scarce dared to draw your breath in the terror-laden air: oh! lift your hands, and swear to fight him to the utmost end! Whoever is against him on this day will fight for God. And therefore I say unto you now: See that ye fight well.”

Again Fra Luca paused; and after one moment of rustle, there was a deep hush of suspense; for now, silent himself, the ecstatic was pointing his long thin finger where, in the fast-gathering dusk, stood a rude gaunt crucifix—the same that had once stood guarding his lonely cave in the desert of scrub and stone. All eyes followed the direction, and all held their breath, waiting for what was to come next.

“Do you see that image of the Redeemer?” he said at last—“that image of the Son of God, who took man’s flesh to save the souls

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

of men? Do you see that wound upon His side? You think it is the carven gash that you have seen on other effigies of Christ, to show where once the Roman soldier pierced Him. You are wrong. It is not that. It is a fresher, newer wound, a later outrage that the Son of God has had to bear. Would you know who did it? Would you know whose hand in sacrilegious fury hurled the spear, and wounded Christ anew? I will tell you; for these very eyes of mine were allowed to see it done. The hand was Ezelin's. With my own eyes I saw him hurl his spear at that figure, and I heard his laugh of insult, of triumph, of scorn."

A long murmur of horror followed the awful declaration—the revelation of a deed which, for the men of the thirteenth century, was more terrible than any of the crimes which the despot was ever known to have committed.

"Yes," continued Fra Luca, "Christ has bled again beneath the spear. He has suffered

The Miracle

again for men. He has writhed again upon the cross; and it was Ezelin that struck Him. Can ye look upon His tortured body, can ye look upon His bleeding wound, and, seeing, not avenge Him?"

And again, with his long thin finger pointed at the crucifix, which the shadows were climbing round, he kept the eyes of the immense multitude riveted upon the figure.

"It is moving!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"It twists! It writhes! It shudders!" cried a dozen more.

"The wound is bleeding! The wound is bleeding!" cried innumerable others. "A miracle! A miracle! The miracle of God! The miracle of God! the miracle of God!"

The whole cathedral swayed and surged like waves beneath a sudden stroke of storm, and the roar of the human sea grew ever louder, and seemed as if it would never end. It was useless for Fra Luca to attempt to

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

speak, and he let the passion that he had excited spend itself like a tossing flood.

At length something like silence was re-established, and raising his hand once more, he ordered the vast concourse to kneel down.

Then, when all was again hushed and every head was bowed low, the ecstatic stretched his hands above the innumerable caps of steel.

“O invincible God,” he said, while his sentences dropped one by one on the silence. “O invincible God, to whom kneel those who would avenge Thy Son. If Thou hast pity on the ravaged plains; if Thou hast pity on the trembling cities; if Thou hast mercy for the tortured men; if Thou hast mercy for the outraged women; if Thou hast pleasure in the ripening grain; if Thou hast pleasure in the peaceful kine that his ruthless soldiers seize; if Thy hand bestows the olive and the grape, and all that war destroys—oh! give the strength to overcome this man, the direst

The Miracle

that the centuries have known. Bless all these kneeling fighting-men; for, Lord, Thou art their Captain!"

A prolonged sound, like the unfurling of a great wave, followed the prayer. But again he checked it by a gesture, and enforced a mighty silence before he called for the thunder of a mighty shout.

"And now, O men of Padua," he said, "lift up your voice, and, before you start upon your holy work, shout Death to the great foe of God and man."

"Death, death to Ezelin!" burst from the countless throng. "We fight for God, for God!"

Then Fra Luca, descending from the pulpit, raised the miraculous effigy in his arms, and led the way out of the cathedral. The immense armed concourse streamed out into the great square, and, marshalled by the priests and monks, formed itself into an endless procession that wound through the

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

narrow streets of the city to the heavy droning of the chants. The swaying standards and the glittering arks of the relics were carried behind the great image of the Redeemer. One by one the torches flared up as the darkness increased, till the street became alive with innumerable lights, and the procession took the semblance of a river of fire that flung its glare on the dark palaces between which it was streaming, and lighted up the countless faces that craned down from the windows and balconies; while the radiance fell on the shining steel caps and on the steel tips of the pikes, and danced on the iron chain armour. And all along its course, the roar of "Death to Ezelin!" both from the moving crowd and from the houses, mingled with the chanting and drowned it.

Among the monks who walked with Fra Luca in the shadow of the miraculous crucifix when he left the cathedral, there was one who, as he shouted death to the

The Miracle

tyrant, did so with something so like a laugh of scorn, that the monk who was nearest to him turned and looked into his cowl. But the twilight was deepening, and he saw nothing but a pale, close-shaven face whose features were concealed underneath it. The monk had had but a glimpse, but it sufficed to set him thinking. Later, there was a rumour which no argument availed to discredit in the minds of the people, that Ezelin himself had been present in Padua when the crusade was preached against him, and had even stood among the monks who were gathered before the high altar of the cathedral.

Had the double nature of Ezelin's soul manifested itself once again, and, braving a peril a thousand times more terrible than that of battle or assassination, had Ezelin the Mummer once more taken the place of Ezelin the great Captain, of Ezelin the Master of Men?

CHAPTER XXXII.

A COUNCIL OF CAPTAINS.

A FEW days later, Ezelin summoned his principal captains to a council of war; and as he waited for them, he weighed the military situation.

His face was very haggard. He had spent the last three nights with his astrologer, and had not spared himself by day; and want of sleep was telling upon him. But age too was beginning to show upon his features. Superficially, it was still the same pale, close-shaven, inscrutable mask, which, at a distance, gave him an almost boyish appearance. But the minute wrinkles had of late become far more visible; the lines of thought and cruelty had engraved them-

A Council of Captains

selves deeper. It was distinctly an older, sterner, wickeder face.

He walked up and down, as was his wont, with his hands behind his back.

Yes, he had been wise to yield. It was not the time, when he was approaching the decisive struggle, to stand and scout concessions. Yet he feared he had yielded too late. The Lombard archers still looked mutinous; the Genoese slingers too, he was told, still growled. What of the Swabians? Yes, his hold on them was firm, now that he had promised them their fill of plunder. The trustiest were the Saracens. On them he could always rely. Ibrahim alone was as a tower of strength.

But now the stars had turned at last; and it was time. He had had great losses and few successes since the day when his nephew had lost him Padua. He had had him beheaded for that. . . . Would he had had him flayed! . . . Things had gone from bad to worse since

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

then. Ah, but now the tide had turned. . . . He had got hold of Brescia. . . . And now the Milanese nobles who had been driven out of the city by Martin Torriano, the leader of the people, had made him overtures. If he could now capture Milan, all would be changed. Martin and his faction could never hold Milan against him. . . . The stars, which had thrown dismay into the soul of his astrologers, had changed their dreadful face, and were lighting him on to victory. The news he had got that very day proved their altered influence.

The door opened, and the captains he had sent for entered.

"I have sent for you," he said, "to tell you news of weight."

He waited for the slight hum of expectation to subside.

"The Milanese exiles," he went on, "those who had to escape when Martin Torriano seized the government of the city, have gathered up their strength, and have made

A Council of Captains

me overtures. Their friends in Milan will seize the city gates, and open them to them and to us, if I will help. If I can seize Milan, I shall stem the flood of enemies that press me, and make good all recent loss. Milan was Frederick's richest gem, and is worth ten Paduas."

"God's blood!" said one of the captains, "but this is weighty news. You are right: Milan is worth a kingdom."

"It is a flood to seize at turnpoint," said another. "We should have a mighty sack in sight. It is long, very long, since we have had one like it. My men would fight like devils for such plunder."

"Mine are hungry, too," said a third. "They mutter that they are weary of these plains, which have been trampled by too many armies, and where they no longer find their wonted booty, while heaps of plunder can be got to the north of the Alps. . . . Ay, it were time to throw the hounds a sop."

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Then we march straight on Milan?" asked Lionello.

"Ay, at once," answered Ezelin. "The Cremonese slingers that are camped outside the western gate can strike their tents to-morrow; and then the Bassanese cross-bowmen; and after that the Lombard pikemen and the Veronese. Give orders straight-way."

"Before to-morrow's sunset my Saracens can be upon their way," said Ibrahim.

"What of the Swabians?" asked Ezelin.

"They are ready," answered Hermann.

"That's well," said Ezelin. "I cannot lose a day, if I would seize Milan. We must be beneath the walls before the Legate and the allies can gather to its help. Their numbers are rapidly swelling, but the road is still open, and the prize is worth the utmost speed. Listen," he went on: "last night I had a dream of splendid omen. I heard a cry of eagles, battling at a dizzy height above a

A Council of Captains

bottomless abyss. Unhelped in his dreadful plight, one mighty eagle held his own against six furious foes with hiss and clash of wings. Big drops of blood fell in the precipice, like the first raindrops of a thunderstorm; and beneath the blows, the feathers fell rotating to the depths. By-and-by all grew silent. One by one, the rent and bleeding eagles fled or died. Alone against the clear sky, unscathed and unspent, that one great eagle circled still, victorious over the many."

"May your dream prove true," said one of the captains. "If speed can but atone for lesser numbers, we may soon redeem our losses. But what clamour's that?"

A hubbub of voices was heard outside. Ezelin approached the window.

"What's that?" he cried. "Throw open the casement. Let me look. What have they got in the court below? See to it and tell me, Lionello."

"It appears to be a knave dismounting. The

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

soldiers are crowding round him," said the captain who had already spoken.

"Perhaps a messenger from the Milanese exiles," said another.

"It is a rider on a staggering steed," said Lionello, re-entering the room, "who brings you evil tidings, and ends our projects roughly. Take and read this."

Ezelin snatched a despatch from his hand.

"Martin Torriano," he read, "has marched out of Milan, and bars the way. The allies are marching to join him."

There was a murmur of surprise and anger.

"Then we must meet their united forces in open battle," said Hermann.

But Ezelin crumpled up the despatch, and throwing it disdainfully away, "Why stand ye gaping?" he said with a royal scorn. "Do ye doubt the stars? Milan shall still be ours, though we must beat the foe in open plain. This check disturbs a morning's purpose; that is all. I trust my lurid planet. Leave me here to think.

A Council of Captains

A power ye know not of presides over the vessel of my life, and with its help I'll steer through tossing waves of fortune, till it rides triumphant in the haven of Success. What if from time to time a great wave hides the auspicious stars? 'Tis but the passing stress of one day's tempest. Trust to me to save the vessel. It is from the summit of the storm's worst wave that we first see port, and by the light of great, resistless stars. Such stars I have; and from the wildest height of the tempest they show me victory. Your part is but to fight, each steady at his post. Now go, I say."

"And yet," he continued to himself, when they had left him, "my purposes are staggered, and doubts assail my soul. Each day I seem to get further from my object. Did I not make the pact, and have I not kept it? Yet the Shadowy One does not fulfil it. Was not the first male infant duly sacrificed, unchristened? I gave my son, and where is the reward? The years go by, and victory recedes; till now, at

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

length, I am forced to stake my all upon a single cast."

He paced up and down the room for a while in silence. Then he stopped abruptly.

"What, am I doubting?" he said. "No, by all the glare of those terrific caves. There shall be no despair, not even wonder in my soul, that thou, great Shadowy Father, shouldst not care to crown me yet. I know thee, who thou art. I trust thee wholly, simply—more than child ever trusted an earthly parent. Thou wilt bestow thy gift in thy good time. Thy pledge will be fulfilled in thy own hour. Oh, thou wilt raise me yet to my ambition's summits. I shall be king of all North Italy. Do I forget thy promise? No; and I can wait. And if it suits thy purposes to let a single battle crown me, it shall be even so."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STRENGTH OF THE AMULET.

"You have sent for me?" said Lionello, a few hours later, as he raised the heavy curtain of a room where Selvaggia stood at the window, looking down into the court of the palace. She turned quickly.

"Yes, I have sent for you," she answered. "Tell me: is it true that Ezelin is about to march on Milan?"

"Yes," he said, "it is true."

"And there will be a great battle?"

"Yes, a great battle is certain."

"And what will be the issue?"

"The enemy are in great force; but he is a great captain. I cannot tell you more."

"And now tell me," she said: "why did they kill my child?"

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

He started at the sudden change of subject.

"Wherever Ezelin is, there is a wind of madness blowing," he replied, after a moment; "so much crazy crime, that sober motives can scarcely be assigned. It were time for God to throw in a thunderbolt, to clear the air of evil."

"God deals His blows through human hands," she rejoined. "You were the friend of Gisla. You owe her murderer no love."

"As little as you," said Lionello, looking at her fixedly, "for he undid your child. But not my hand may strike. Gisla herself forbade, and still forbids, though she is dead. And yet to think that all these years have passed, and that no hand has yet avenged her death! Many a time I have cast about me for a weapon, and clenched my teeth. But I have seen her sainted eyes look down from heaven; and such a look has come from under her pure, aureoled brows, that I have

The Strength of the Amulet

thrown the knife away. But though I may not do the deed myself, others are free to strike. The Church herself calls for a hand to do it. I can hear the rush of Fate's wings."

And, as he spoke, the thought flashed through his mind that the crusade then being preached against Ezelin was the real God-ordained crusade, as real as that piteous crusade of the children, in which Gisla and he had taken part together long years ago, had been unreal.

"Ay, the Church has spoken, and it is time to call on God," said Selvaggia. "But, as I say, He strikes through human hands, and nerves the arm that is to justify His ways. Oh for a dagger tempered to white heat in God's own awful forge, to end this craze of blood, and save the lives that are beating at Mercy's tight-closed gate!"

"You are right. The world cannot bear Ezelin much longer." And Lionello's face

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

assumed a look that Selvaggia had never yet seen upon it.

"I will let you know by-and-by, when it is ripe, and when we meet elsewhere," she went on, "a plan that has been forming in my soul. You know how many have good cause for fear, for hate, for implacable vengeance. And yet the sum of their accumulated hate is as nothing compared with mine. Ah, when the one who stole the wild beast's whelp, that she has sought and sought, lies under claw and fang! Lend me your aid, though it be but passive, and I will lend you mine. Gisla shall be avenged."

"It will be God's blow," Lionello answered. "Whoever strikes, it is His hand that will send him rolling into the great abyss."

"Now tell me but this," said Selvaggia. "In camp, it is your men who guard Ezelin's tent. On the night before the great battle, can you let me know the password,

The Strength of the Amulet

so that before break of day I may pass by unstopped? Can you set men round his tent who shall neither see nor hear as I pass? I need no other help."

"You shall have it," Lionello answered. "Before the next battle, you shall have the password, and the orders shall be given."

"And now send me Hermann," said Selvaggia. "I know he is here in Brescia."

"He is here in the palace, and I will send him;" and Lionello left her.

When the Swabian entered the room, he was very white.

"You need me?" he asked.

"Yes, I need you, Hermann," she said. "Were we not, of old, friends in another life?"

"Yes, but we died," he answered.

"Ay, we died."

"And oh, how cold and dark is Death's lone country!" he whispered. "You that dwell in its chill shadows, why have you sought your fellow-ghost?"

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Because those shadows conceal infinite peril," she replied; "because the hours are full of infinite menace. My fellow-ghost alone can save me."

"And suppose the dead were now to help the dead, would they come again to life?"

"Perhaps," she answered; "if they fled back into life's world together. But all is lost if the new blood should mantle too soon hot and red in their veins. Do not yet take my hand. Do not seek to kiss these lips. Remain the ghost till all is ready: yon tapestry has eyes. Keep a ghost's voice: yon walls have ears. Or wait at least till twilight shields us. Command your thoughts, your words, your looks."

Hermann withdrew the hand that he had laid on her arm.

"You are right," he whispered; "we must still for a while be phantoms in a phantom land, . . . for a little while longer."

"But if we mean once more to breathe

The Strength of the Amulet

the breath of life," she said, "*he* must go down to his death. It is a choice between his life and mine."

"Murder?" Hermann whispered, while he retreated a step from her.

"Do not take fright so quickly," she whispered back. "I do not ask for that. Another hand than yours will strike the blow. But it is you who must save me meanwhile. We must plan a scheme of flight, and you must put me beyond his power. Listen. A big battle will be fought in a few days. On the night preceding it, you must carry your Swabians over to the enemy. I know that they are mutinous and ready to desert his cause; and I will ride away with you into safety."

"And my honour as a soldier?" he protested. "Do you forget that?"

She frowned, and looked at him as she had looked at him years before in the leopard moat. She still spoke in a whisper; but it

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

was one that had a hiss in it, and her eyes had an angry gleam.

"It is you who forget," she said; "it is you who forget that my destruction has been decided on—decided on as surely as was that of Gisla. You must choose between him and me."

Hermann remained a few moments in thought.

"I will do it," he said.

"Good," she said, "that is settled. Meanwhile we must be dumb. Now leave me. We must not be seen together."

"So far, all goes well," Selvaggia said to herself when she was again alone. "But we must make things sure."

She went to the window, and looked down into the court below. Ibrahim, the captain of the Saracens, was walking up and down. She made a sign to him to come up.

"Thou art not a Sicilian Arab," she said in Arabic, as he stood in silence after his usual salaam.

The Strength of the Amulet

"I am a Syrian from Lebanon."

"Thou wert given as a slave by the head of thy people to my father, the great Emperor, wert thou not, when he was in Syria for the crusade? And from his service thou camest into that of Ezelin?"

"Yes."

"What were thy instructions?"

"To obey blindly."

"To obey blindly any master thou mightst have?"

"No. To obey blindly whoever showed me the sign."

"The sign of death?"

Ibrahim nodded.

"Did my father, the Emperor, ever show thee the sign and call on thee to strike?"

"No."

Selvaggia took from her bosom a small emerald amulet, and unfastened it from the gold chain by which she wore it round her neck.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

"Dost thou know this?" she said.

He took it and held it to the light. "It is the sign," he said. "Who is to be stricken?"

"Ezelin."

Not a muscle quivered in the Syrian's face as he gave back the amulet. But the colour died out of it, leaving the peculiar ashen grey of Eastern lividness. There was no question of his resisting the mandate which his whole nature had been drilled to obey, and which swept away like a flood his loyalty as a soldier, his devotion as a man, the fidelity of years. All that had been in abeyance since his youth, sprang again into existence—the mystic coercion of his initiation into the sect; its awful obsession; the immanence of its right over his life and his action. One instant's silent wrench within his soul—that was all.

"Is that the whole order?" he asked.

"Thou art to wait till the coming battle,"

The Strength of the Amulet

she said, "and then strike him where the fight is thickest. He has a protection against murder—a light steel shirt of mail incomparably wrought. Some say that it was made by evil powers. On the night before the battle, I will filch it from his tent, and he shall go into the battle with nothing to save him from thy blow. Thou wilt have him at thy mercy."

"Where the shadow is to fall, it will fall," answered the Assassin.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SLEEP BEFORE BATTLE.

EZELIN had pitched his camp near Cassano on the Adda. He had taken his measures with that combination of boldness and care which marks a great commander; and by his marches and counter-marches, had so disconcerted his opponents as to prevent their junction before his passage of the river. Only half his enemies—the Marquis of Este, Palavicino with the Mantuans, Dovara with the men of Cremona, and the other allies—were opposed to him. The Milanese, according to his calculation, could not arrive in time. But even if they did, he was ready to meet them.

The morrow's battle was to decide his fate.

Sleep before Battle

Not that he feared the issue or mistrusted the great Lord of the Sleepless Eyes. He believed that, with his dread father's help, he could win, however strong the coalition. The dark-winged, dreadful messengers of Eblis would throw their mantle round him and spread soul-numbing fears among his foes at the decisive hour. Had he not done the Dark Power's will for years? Had he not kept the Pact? Had he not prayed to him by night, and felt his spirit cower as it adored him? He trusted in the Dark and Wonderful.

One point alone disturbed the serenity of his confidence. He had not expected to have to cross the Adda in the enemy's teeth just at Cassano. His mother had warned him years before against a place so named—a place whose whereabouts he did not even know. Cassano, she had told him, was darkly connected with his fate. And now he found himself obliged to cross at a spot so

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

named. But how retrace his steps and choose another, now that his troops were face to face with battle? On the other hand, the planets were propitious, and his astrologers had bidden him stake his all upon his star. He felt the overpowering sense of his own military genius. Why fear the dawn? It would bring victory.

Now he would take a little rest during the few hours that remained of night, and ease his overstrained brow before the break of light. What scanty rest he had taken in the last few days!

Before stretching himself on the camp-bed at the bottom of his tent, he filled a beaker with wine. "Eblis," he said, as he raised the dread libation, "here on the eve of the decisive day, in the plain where my foes wait me, I drink this cup to thee!"

Then he threw himself on the bed and fell asleep almost at once.

The silence was deep round the tent, all

Sleep before Battle

sounds that could disturb his rest having been expressly forbidden.

An hour or so went by. Then there was an almost inaudible sound; a faint, faint rustle. The curtain of the tent was cautiously lifted; and Selvaggia, after peeping and listening, entered on tiptoe, groping.

His breathing, which rose and fell with fate-like regularity, told her that his sleep was a deep one. But she feared to go too near him lest he should wake. "I wonder where he's laid it?" she thought. . . . "In this heap of cloaks and arms? . . . A shirt of mail will make a rustling as I lift it. . . . Can it be beneath these weapons? . . . They may clank. . . . I'll take them up gently one by one. . . . If only I knew where to look. . . . If only I could see."

She lifted the weapons with caution: what she sought was not among them; and she searched in the other corner of the tent.

"Ah, here it is; I feel it under these

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

leather coats. If only I could get it free! . . . Let me listen to his breathing. . . . It is still regular."

"Cassano, . . . not Cassano; . . . it means death . . . anywhere else, . . . not there."

She started. He was only muttering in his sleep; and yet how violent was the thumping of her heart! "If only I could pull it out," she thought. . . . "It's not easy. . . . Ah, at last I've got it! . . . How cold the sweat is breaking on my forehead!"

She extricated the shirt of mail from the heap, and looked at it for a moment.

"Now the blow is free to strike thee," she thought. "Nothing can save thee, nothing. Go forth into the battle. . . ."

And passing out through the door of the tent, she threaded her way among the sleeping soldiers.

"Have you got it?" whispered a voice. "Show it. . . ."

"Here it is," she said. "I sought it for

Sleep before Battle

a long time in vain. It seemed a century. I had to make some noise. He muttered. More than once I thought all was lost. But he did not wake. Have you the horses?"

"Yes," answered Hermann.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CASSANO.

THERE are many accounts of the Battle of Cassano. Only one of them describes it as it appeared to the bowmen and slingers who took part in it. Amid the showers of shafts and of stones, they saw the dark-winged messengers of Eblis flying round the pale man on the great black steed—the same that had once been killed under him and brought back to life by his magic. In the middle of the river-bed, they heard him furiously exhorting his men and leading his Saracens through the whirling water. There was no thunder of cannon in those days; but the primeval artillery of tempest boomed over the battle, as it had boomed round the black towers of Romano on the night of Ezelin's conception;

Cassano

and, as then, the running finger of the storm scribbled its fiery cabalistic Z's on the black background of the clouds that had swept down from the Alps into the plain. From the long straight sword of the diabolical Paduan streamed answering flashes, as he rode ruthless over the bodies of his men to certain victory. The water was alive with mingled men and horses—a human bridge for Ezelin. The scimitars of the Saracens flashed white in the lightning. From the sky above swept a wild wave of rain. The air was filled with the sound of it. The earth shook and broke under it. It blotted out the heavens, the heights on which the enemy waited, the onward ranks of the soldiery. It hedged Ezelin about with the innumerable points of its silver shafts. It hid him from the shadow that all day had followed him closer even than the shadowy guard of Eblis.

The foremost ranks had already found a footing on the bank, when there was a sudden

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

cry of "The Milanese! The Milanese!" and a new swarm of opponents, through a break in the storm, were seen crowding the heights. Yet even then the confused mass of men struggling across the river paused but for a moment, and resumed their onward rush. Ezelin's soldiers, following his irresistible lead, were driving the defenders from the bank, when all at once another cry—fiercer, more terrible—rang out, and the nearer troops ebbed and surged like a whirlpool about him. The seething tumult fell back as a spent wave, and for an instant Ezelin was seen alone. He was stricken; but he raised himself in the saddle, his sword a white flash against the black clouds, while the ranks that had landed rolled back into the water.

The last battle had been fought and lost.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LAST THROW.

FORTY-EIGHT hours had passed since the capture of Ezelin. He was lying wounded, and chained to a pillar in a dim dungeon with a single-barred window. A man-at-arms and a gaoler were standing near him with a lantern.

"He is still alive?" asked the former.

"Ay, but as good as dead," answered the gaoler. "His heart still beats, and he still breathes. He was stabbed in the back by one of his own men."

"It was madness to ford the Adda in our teeth," remarked the soldier. "The river-bank was steep; the stream was strong; the odds were all against him. . . ."

"They say, though, that he would have

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

won the day, if he hadn't been stabbed," said the other.

"Ay, there was a moment when he swept our men like chaff before him. Fiends with black wings flew round him. I have it from a slinger who saw them. They say he shouted in the thick of it, 'On, on, in Satan's name!' And it was then that one of his own Saracens struck him."

The gaoler pushed the wounded man with his foot. "He can still groan," he said.

"Leave him in peace," said his companion; "he isn't common clay. The world has seen few captains like him. Give him some water, man."

"What's the use?" returned the gaoler. "He's drunk his last. . . . Come, he's as good as dead."

They were leaving the dungeon, when they stopped. "He is speaking," said the soldier.

"Some one has touched me," Ezelin was muttering. "Where's the water? . . . How

The Last Throw

dark it is! . . . Hold thy torch higher, Sin. . . . I cannot keep my footing in these black lobbies of hell. What am I sliding in? Is it in blood? . . .

“And how shall I get back through all these sunless gullets? Must I run once more the gauntlet of that chained wild pack thou saidst were human tigers? . . . I never shall get through. . . .

“Out of their power at last! . . .

“The glorious and incomparable hour has come. . . . A few short minutes more, and I shall meet my father. . . . Why should I fear the red glare? . . . Am I not going to the flaming shore where all will bow before me?—where I shall wear a flaming circlet far brighter than the dull crown for which men fight their earthly battles? On a car with dazzling wheels of fire, I come, I come, O Eblis. . . .

“But bolts and bars surround me; shackles cramp me. I am numb, clammy with blood.

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

All, all is dark about me—dark and silent. . . .
The Pact, the Pact. . . . I kept it; I kept
every clause. . . . Hast thou betrayed thy
son? Thought cannot think it. . . . A black
abyss of doubt yawns round me.”

There was a pause in the wounded man’s
mutterings. A door opened, and Fra Luca
entered. He made a sign to impose silence
on the two men who were watching the
prisoner, and, approaching the pillar to which
he was chained, looked at him intently.

“Who has dared to put these shackles on
me?” Ezelin began again. “Who has tried
to take my life? . . . My body has been
stricken. . . . Did I put on the crown? I
cannot remember.

“What a war have I not waged with men!
And all for him; all for his sake; all for his
glory. . . . Fear ran wild in all my lands.
. . . . These bandages must off. . . .

“She must be driven mad. . . . I tell you
I am Madness. . . . See my crown. . . . The

The Last Throw

dreadful crown of straw. . . . Am I not clad in Folly's wild insignia? . . . They have thrown something dark-red upon the floor . . . there, there. . . . It is my scarlet mantle. It has grown black, black like a pool of blood. . . .

"What means this red glare? What means this lurid radiance? . . . It grows; it grows. Is it Hell's glare already?"

He raised himself on one elbow, and stared wildly round him. A red glow, cast by a fire that had broken out among the outer buildings, was streaming through the grated window of the dungeon. The great bare wall behind Ezelin was suddenly lit up by it, and Fra Luca, who had been listening in silence to the wounded man's ravings, suddenly saw two shadows appear upon it as if sitting at dice, while their voices seemed to come from a great distance.

"Dost thou care to try once more?" said Death. "The hour is one of those that seem

The Lord of the Dark Red Star

to claim a game between us, for his state is very critical. His life-blood goes. It is time he were mine."

"Make not too sure," answered Sin.

"These galling bandages must off," the wounded man muttered. "The flaming gate is passed. . . . Why wait?"

"Play, Mother Sin," urged Death.

Sin raised her dice. "Now for his soul," she said. "Eleven!"

"Free at last!" cried Ezelin. "Father, I come!"

"A twelve! A twelve!" cried Death, who had thrown his. "I win! I win!"

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